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Still Unfolding: Paths to Womanhood in the New American Bildungsroman

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Still Unfolding: Paths to Womanhood in the New American Bildungsroman

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2017

Dedicated in memory of my brother Jon,

who cheered me on loudly

and is deeply missed each day.

Acknowledgements

This is a dissertation about coming of age—about who we are, where we've come from, and where we still want to go. I want to take this opportunity to give thanks to the people who've helped me on my own various paths of development, academic and otherwise.

Thanks, first and foremost, to my brilliant, demanding, and insightful dissertation committee—Liz Cullingford, Cole Hutchison, Mia Carter, Heather Houser, and Wayne Lesser. You spent hours with my words, you helped me see and make connections, and you pushed me to keep going, even as I wrote most of this dissertation 2000 miles away from Austin. Thank you.

To my parents, Chris and Ellen—thank you for your love and for supporting me in countless tangible and intangible ways. I could not have done this without you. To my brother Matthew and sister-in-law, Heather—thank you for the visits, texts, cat pictures, and shared meals. To my nephew, Adam—you are a sparkle of a human, the best kid I know. Thank you for brightening all of our lives. Thanks also to the Scarpino family, who welcomed me warmly from the moment we met and cheered me on as I wrote this dissertation.

My brother Jon encouraged me with his love, his enthusiasm for life, and his blind confidence in me. It remains unfathomable to me that he is not here to see me finish, but that I finished is entirely for him.

Graduate school connected me with some of the loveliest people in the world. To my Texas spirit sisters, Brianna Jewell and Yvette DeChavez—thank you for getting me through, and most of all, for the fun and love. Brianna, my original Austin adventure partner, I treasure all of our long talks and weird nights. Yvette, my long-distance writing buddy until the very end, we have always just understood each other—I am so grateful for you.

To Sally Treanor and Jenny Howell, my fellow first semester TAs turned dear, dear friends, thank you for always being willing to read my work and for helping me fix sentences when they didn't make sense. Thanks to the DeMott/Wenzl family for their friendship and kindness. Thank you to Alejandro Puyana and Tinisha Hancock for supporting my long-distance dissertation progress by housing me and drinking wine with me during my visits back to Texas.

To my lifelong friends Jocey Florence, Christina Galvez, Joanna Hatt, and Danielle Emery—thank you for everything. Thank you for calling to check in, for flying to Texas to see me, and for sending scarves, flowers, hot chocolate mix, writing music, good luck charms, and friendship.

And finally, to Sam Scarpino, thank you for sitting down next to me at a crowded party on a very hot Texas night all those summers ago. In the acknowledgements to his dissertation, Sam noted that we had been dating for exactly 1 year; now, as I finish mine, we've been married exactly 1.5 (to the day). Thank you for the adventures, the meals and cups of tea, the unwavering confidence in my abilities, and most of all, for the love.

Still Unfolding: Paths to Womanhood in the

New American Bildungsroman

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This dissertation examines generic trends and ideological innovations in contemporary women's coming-of-age narratives in the United States. Through a comparative genre study, I illuminate and interpret a number of key revisions within the genre since the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century classics, including a radical shift in the endings of many recent texts.

I show that today's female bildungsroman subject is ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse, and that she is getting older. She has an overall broader sense of educational and professional opportunity, and more relaxed attitudes toward sexuality and marriage than protagonists in the past. These shifts have implications for today's narrative endpoints, and as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, many recent female bildungsromane have conclusions that are conspicuously open-ended and future-oriented, rather than ending in marriage, death, or disillusionment. Contra Franco Moretti's 1987 claim that "A *Bildung* is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as *concluded*: only if youth passes into maturity, and comes there to a stop" (26), authors today often eschew traditional endpoints for their female protagonists, suggesting

and often celebrating the opportunity for protagonists' further development and personal exploration. This kind of flexible, "in process" narrative resolution reflects, I argue, a contemporary view of development as a continual experience, rather than a discrete stage that is confined to youth. Implicit in the view of development as an ongoing process is a sense of hopefulness. Though that hope may be tentative, it marks many of today's texts, even those that feature traumatic conditions and hardship.

In this dissertation, I show that the shift to flexible, open endings is borne out across a diverse group of texts from the past decade (2006-2016): Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Susan Choi's *My Education* (2013), and Patricia Park's *Re Jane* (2015). In each of my three chapters, I explore generic revisions by focusing on a classic bildungsroman trope—education, migration and mobility, and social class. Contemporary modifications to these tropes correspond to revisions in the ways that today's female protagonists view themselves in the world. While these texts remain identifiable as bildungsromane and are connected to the generic tradition in key ways, this body of texts also reconceptualizes the sites, timelines, and goals for female development and identity formation today.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Coming of Age in the 21st Century— New Sites, New Routes, New Timelines for Women

In the 2012 pilot episode of the HBO television series *Girls*, Hannah, a recent college graduate working an unpaid publishing internship in New York City, is stunned when her visiting parents tell her they are cutting off their financial support of her "groovy lifestyle." Indignant, she responds by declining to see them again before they leave, explaining that her life is already packed with other, more important responsibilities: "I have work, and then I have a dinner thing, and then I am busy—*trying to become who I am*" ("Pilot"). While we are meant to laugh at Hannah's conception of her quest for self-development as a heavy burden, and perceive her quest as a self-indulgent privilege, both the scene and the show cater to viewers' longstanding appreciation of coming of age as an important and fascinating process, one that Hannah describes, with feeling, as people *becoming who they are*. This dissertation explores how the process of identity formation is represented in the literature of this contemporary moment, particularly in narratives about American women. In order to assess what is universal and what is distinct about these narratives, I compare them to well-known coming-of-age stories from the genre's long history. How is American women's identity formation depicted in literary fiction today? What are the sites where it occurs? The timelines that define it? The pressures that shape it? The goals that orient it? What do

these literary representations tell us about contemporary female[1] identity formation in the early twenty-first century, an era of widely expanded options for women as well as new cultural battles over women's rights?

Hannah, at age twenty-four, is an exemplar of what has been called "the changing timetable for adulthood" in the United States (Henig). Over the past fifty years—following the invention of oral contraception, the legalization of abortion, and radical ideological shifts concerning premarital sex, cohabitation, and gender roles—people now tend to reach two traditional markers of adulthood, marriage and parenthood, much later in life than they did a few decades ago. And many people, rather than settling into a single job and geographic area, now have multiple careers and relocate multiple times throughout their adult lives.[2] Even US legal statutes define adulthood in ways that are inconclusive, or even conflicting: US adolescents become legal adults on their eighteenth birthdays, and can thereafter vote and be sent to war. Yet they are not allowed to order a glass of wine at a restaurant until three year later, or rent a car without paying a youth "penalty" until they are twenty-five.

Media coverage of "Millennials" and "the Boomerang Generation" (young adults who leave the nest but then return to their parents' homes) has led to the widespread cultural belief that coming of age now happens later in life and takes longer than it did in

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[1] A note on "female"—female, of course, refers to one's bodily sexual characteristics, while gender is a flexible identity construct. Because of the age connotations of *girl*, *young woman*, and *woman*, however, I sometimes use "female" as an imperfect synonym for these terms.

[2] In "What Is It About 20-Somethings?" journalist Robin Marantz Henig highlights the period in one's twenties, in particular, as "a black box" with "a lot of churning." She explains: "One-third of people in their 20s move to a new residence every year. Forty percent move back home with their parents at least once. They go through an average of seven jobs in their 20s, more job changes than in any other stretch. Two-thirds spend at least some time living with a romantic partner without being married."

the past. In 2002, *Newsweek* coined the term "adultolescence" to describe this so-called failure of young people to transition smoothly into adulthood ("Bringing Up"). Implicit in this model of delayed or protracted adult development is the sense that young people now need extra guidance in learning how to be adults—a trend reflected linguistically by the invention of the term "adulting." The tongue-in-cheek verb is used to refer to the successful fulfillment of traditional adult responsibilities like holding a steady job and paying bills on time. Though it has not yet been added to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, in 2016 the editors listed "adulting" as one of the "Words We're Watching." In 2013, a self-help book of pragmatic advice for twenty-somethings, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps,* became a *New York Times* bestseller. Adulthood, it seems, is not only hard to define but increasingly difficult to achieve.

Recently, psychological and sociological research has taken up the question of how markers and timelines of adult identity formation are changing. Psychologist Laurence Steinberg observes that young people today experience a conspicuously "prolonged adolescence," and he calls this "delayed" transition to adulthood "one of the most notable demographic trends of the last two decades." Psychologist Jeffrey Jenson Arnett attributes even greater significance to the phenomenon, arguing that it represents a new, distinct period in human development. According to Arnett, this new life stage, which he calls "emerging adulthood," occurs from about age eighteen to the mid- to late-twenties. In his study of diverse groups across the United States, Arnett has found that people no longer cite events like marriage or parenthood as signaling their ascension into adulthood. Instead, they point to more abstract or invisible markers, such as the

assumption of personal responsibility, autonomous decision-making, and financial independence (Arnett vi). These new measures make it harder to assess and observe one's own (or others') transition into adulthood. As a result, according to a 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, "The line between childhood and adulthood is blurrier than ever" (Beck). It has become a cultural commonplace to criticize young adults for being slow to reach "full" adulthood—a complicated status I will interrogate throughout this dissertation—but both Steinberg and Arnett take a positive view of this revised timeline. For them, this opportunity for continued personal exploration in early legal adulthood "fosters novelty-seeking and the acquisition of new skills" (Steinberg), and can offer young people a fruitful period of "self-focus" and a wide sense of possibility (Arnett 8). This conception of personal development as an end in itself invites accusations of narcissism, and psychologist Jean Twenge observes that Millennials are indeed more narcissistic than those in previous generations ("Me, Me, Me"). But other researchers disagree: in the 2010 paper, "It is Developmental Me, Not Generation Me," authors Brent W. Roberts et al. argue that the young adult period of identity formation is an inherently self-focused one—not only for Millennials, but for *all* generations. The authors suggest that today's young people will "outgrow" this so-called narcissism, just as those before them did: "[E]very generation is Generation Me, as every generation of younger people are more narcissistic than their elders" (Roberts et al.).

Accusations of narcissism are often leveled against the characters of *Girls*, who undoubtedly feel they are navigating an important period of self-exploration between

childhood and adulthood.[3] Hannah, of course, believes this time of personal development to be so vital that it warrants her parents' unwavering emotional and financial support. The very title of the show, *Girls*, reflects the fact that though the show's female leads are college-educated, legal adults living away from home, they are not yet fully grown-up women. The show suggests that these young characters are at the *beginning* of their journeys of personal development. Over six seasons, the young women make their first forays into the workforce, undergo various romantic experiences, and question who they are and what they want out of life. Hailed by some critics as the successor to *Sex in the City*—the show "that showed the world unmarried women in their 30s who weren't upset about it"—*Girls* has been joined by a number of recent television shows that explore what coming of age can look like for contemporary women in their twenties and thirties (Galanes). Among these programs are *Broad City*, the Comedy Central sitcom that, like *Girls*, follows young white women in their twenties living in New York City; and HBO's *Insecure*, a show about a black woman living in Los Angeles whose twenty-ninth birthday prompts her to reevaluate the direction of her life. *Insecure* has been called "revolutionary" by *NPR* for "redefining how black women are depicted on TV" (Deggans). *Broad City* has also been called "radical" for its depiction of devoted female friendship (Katz). The crass comedy "has interrogated what it really means to grow up" (D'Addario), and one critic notes that the friendship between the two female protagonists illustrates the way in which young adults today, marrying later than ever before,

[3] The character of Hannah (and sometimes show creator and Hannah-actress Lena Dunham) incites particular vitriol from viewers. For recent commentary on these reactions, see: Jennifer Keishin Armstrong's "Why Do We Love to Hate Hannah Horvath So Much?" and Kathryn Van Arendonk's "Hannah Horvath, Why Do We (Still) Hate Thee So?"

often have "a friendship that occupies the psychic space that used to be devoted to spouses and children" (Garber). At this moment of great popular and critical interest in coming of age—and of shifts in popular ideas about when and how this process occurs—these shows suggest that the development of young women has particularly captured the popular imagination.

Significantly, though, even amidst this interest in female identity formation, and despite the advances in women's rights made in the second half of the twentieth century, women's equality is still unachieved. Women continue to earn less than men (figures range from the widely-cited 79 cents on the dollar to about 92 cents[4]), with older women and women of color facing even more dramatic wage gaps. On the social front, in the past few years, conservative politicians have waged what has been called a "War on Women," dramatically restricting women's access to abortion in many states and undermining some of second-wave feminism's key victories.[5] Most recently, the 2016 US presidential election gave sexism a national platform. Although Hillary Clinton became the first woman to win the presidential nomination of a major party, she lost the election to her Republican opponent, Donald Trump, who said during the campaign that the former Secretary of State did not have "a presidential look" and that "the only thing" she had

[4] A 2016 congressional report, for instance, found that women earn, on average, 79 percent what men do ("Gender Pay"). Others view this measurement, which comes from comparing income census data by gender, to be overly simplistic or misleading. In a recent piece in *The Washington Post,* Robert J. Samuelson calls the 79 percent figure "bogus." He points to other research that suggests that "after adjusting for differences in gender employment patterns," the number is closer to 92 percent. For links to additional studies of the wage gap, see: Glenn Kessler's "Fact Checker: Here Are the Facts Behind That '79 cent' Pay Gap Factoid."

[5] According to the Guttmacher Institute, states enacted 334 new abortion restrictions between 2010 and July 2016. For an analysis of the implications of these and other restrictions, see Molly Redden's 2015 *Mother Jones* piece, "The War on Women is Over—and Women Lost."

going for her was "the woman's card" (Keith). In a pre-election interview with *PBS News*, Armando Manno, a bartender in Ohio, summed up the feeling of many Americans: "Nothing against women," he said, "but I don't want a woman president right now" (Bush).

This tension between the opportunities and the constraints of contemporary womanhood lies at the heart of my dissertation. How does this mixed climate of progress and regression, achievement and hostility, shape contemporary stories of female coming of age? How does today's female protagonist view herself in the world? What does she define herself in relation to? What does *bildung* look like when it is the norm for women to go to college, have careers, and control pregnancy—but also to see some of their rights hanging by a thread? What markers of female adulthood do today's authors privilege, and what traits or developmental experiences do they value? And significantly, how do the answers to these questions differ from what they might have been in 1847, when Charlotte Brontë wrote the classic female coming-of-age tale, *Jane Eyre*? Or in 1963, when Sylvia Plath published *The Bell Jar?* Or even less than three decades ago, in 1990, when Jamaica Kincaid wrote *Lucy*? In this dissertation, I engage these questions from a variety of angles. Specifically, I examine the representations of female coming of age in contemporary American literary fiction through a comparative genre study of six recent bildungsromane featuring female protagonists. I explore how today's authors depict girlhood, womanhood, and "American" identity formation in this *Girls* era: an historical moment when our understanding of sexuality and gender has been profoundly deepened thanks to the feminist and sexual revolutions, and when women's educational and

professional opportunities are more expansive than ever before in history, but when a women does not "appear" presidential to a large percentage of citizens.

The bildungsroman has long been an important vehicle for exploring the coming-of-age process, ever since Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) (1795-1796), widely accepted as the genre's prototype. While Goethe's novel preceded the creation of the term "bildungsroman," the word's etymology dates back to late eighteenth-century Germany. At that time, scholars appropriated the Christian term *bildung* (from *bild*, or image, and *bilden,* or formation), which had until then been used to describe the belief that God guides man to live in his image (Kim 71-2). Scholars gave the term a new secular meaning: the "growth of an individual" (Boes 4). Applying *bildung* to literature, German rhetorician Karl von Morgenstern coined the hybrid term *bildungsroman* in 1819 to describe literature about identity formation (Boes 1). The term did not catch on critically for almost another hundred years, however, until philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey wrote his 1906 work *Poetry and Experience* (Boes, "Modernist" 231). Dilthey offers the first formal outline of the trajectory of a hero's literary bildung: "a young man of [the author's] time . . . enters life in a happy state of naiveté, [and] seeking kindred souls, finds friendship and love"; he then "comes into conflict with the hard realities of the world . . . [and] grows to maturity through diverse life-experiences, finds himself, and attains certainty about his purpose in the world" (335). In this early model of personal development, the individual process was oriented outward to the larger world. Citing Goethe's work as one of the genre's exemplars, Dilthey understood the bildungsroman as

having emerged from a key historical moment: late-Enlightenment Germany, an era characterized by a growing nationalistic culture and interest in progress. Thus Dilthey believed that by the time he offered his definition, the genre had already run its course. He pronounced the bildungsroman "a historical phenomenon whose time had passed" (Hardin xiv).

Generic boundaries are by nature slippery, and the bildungsroman has particularly evaded scholarly consensus. The imprecision in English translations of the term further exacerbates the confusion. Since Dilthey, and especially since the genre spread across Europe, critics have continued to debate the bildungsroman's definition and legacy, and even whether the term should be capitalized, italicized, or both. (I follow Jed Esty's lead and use "bildungsroman.") Some scholars, like Jeffrey Sammons, concur with Dilthey that the genre was part of a fleeting literary moment, while others, like Theodore Ziolkowski, believe the genre endures as a "typically German" form (qtd. in Sammons 30). Still others, like Franco Moretti, believe the bildungsroman had a broader range in geography and time but is nonetheless now exhausted. While Michael Minden rightly observes that "the word *Bildungsroman* has been accepted widely in criticism and journalism without any consensus as to what it means beyond its German genesis" (121), it is also true, to quote Joseph Slaughter, that "every reader of literature surely knows a coming-of-age novel when they see it, even if few share the critical and theoretical vocabulary of a *Bildungsroman* specialist" (7). If we accept the common use of

bildungsroman as a synonym for "coming-of-age novel,"[6] a survey of recent fiction makes clear that the genre not only endures but thrives, particularly in the United States.[7]

Though the concept of bildung is German in origin, the strongest affirmation of individuals' freedom to pursue the realization of their "true" selves and find successful, fulfilling paths into adulthood occurs in the United States. The American emphasis on individualism as a birthright can be heard in Ralph Waldo Emerson's advice to citizens 175 years ago in his essay "Self-Reliance": "Insist on yourself" for "Every great man is a unique." The ideal of the "American Dream," which endures into the twenty-first century, even as our understanding of social inequality has exposed its impossibility for most citizens,[8] relies on our belief that everyone, whatever the circumstances of their birth, deserves the opportunity to grow into the person they want to be and to achieve success through hard work. This belief in the power of individual self-transformation informs not only our national rhetoric, but also our social welfare programs, public education system, and workplace legislation. Thus, this conception of bildung is not merely a narrow, self-involved exercise in narcissism; rather, it hinges on relationships among individuals, and is concerned with how we all relate to one another and function

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[6] For an example of an argument *against* using this loose definition of the genre, see: Sammons's "The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialist: An Attempt at Clarification," an essay in which the critic warns of the "uncontrollable arbitrariness" in the term if divorced from its "particular Germanness" (35).

[7] Other critics, however, prefer labels like "novel of formation" (Marianne Hirsch), "novel of development" (Susan Fraiman), "Individualroman" (Hartmut Steinecke), or "narratives of *Bildung*" (Gunilla Theander Kester). These new terms are often used to avoid what Fraiman calls the genre's "Goethean baggage" (13).

[8] In "The American Dream, Quantified at Last," a 2016 piece in *The New York Times,* journalist David Leonhardt describes how researchers have used new economic data to "create an index of the American dream." This index ultimately reveals, he argues, "a portrait of an economy that disappoints a huge number of people who have heard that they live in a country where life gets better, only to experience something quite different."

as a society. This interest in the identity-formation process is also reflected in our national literature, and the coming-of-age story is an implicitly political and social genre.

The bildungsroman is enduringly popular among US readers and critics alike. Contemporary American novels about the maturation process have received a great deal of critical attention, and a number of twenty-first century Pulitzer or National Book Award winners can be classified as bildungsromane: Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012), and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013). Observing American authors' skill in this traditionally German genre, a 2010 article in *The Guardian* asks, "Why are American writers so good at coming-of-age novels?" (Russell-Williams). And while this dissertation focuses on adult literary fiction, it is also important to note that Young Adult novels about coming of age have become wildly popular in recent years and engaged a new generation of readers. Works like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies are often set in fantasy and post-apocalyptic worlds.

The canon of the American bildungsroman is, even more than its European cousins, notoriously diverse and difficult to define. Still, the genre's enduring popularity has produced a cultural familiarity with a simple coming-of-age narrative: a young person experiences trials and tribulations, and these experiences result in increased understanding about herself and the larger world. However, many of the most commonly cited American "classics" of the genre are dramatically wide-ranging in subject and subject matter. These include Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the

story of a thirteen-year-old Southern orphan who ultimately rejects society for the wild west; Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), about a young girl growing up in poverty in Brooklyn who is ultimately able to pursue a college education; J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which chronicles a disillusioned teenage boy's physical and philosophical wandering across New York City; Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), featuring a six-year-old tomboy who learns hard truths about the racist world; and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), about a female college student and aspiring writer who attempts suicide and is hospitalized for depression. The American canon also adopts classics from across the ocean, and texts like *Jane Eyre* (1847), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1860), and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) also richly inform the American sense of the coming-of-age narrative.[9] Our canonical bildungsromane, then, display vast differences: they are British, Irish, and American; they are set in periods and places with starkly different cultural and social expectations, from the rural antebellum south to 1950s New York City; their plots and narrative timeframes are widely varied; and their protagonists' life stages range from very early childhood to legal adulthood, with some protagonists ending up married with children by the novel's close. While we often associate the coming-of-age genre with a certain teenage and romantic angst, we also consider Scout's prepubescent experiences in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be an exemplar of American versions of the genre. Given all this

[9] This literary exchange is also reciprocal: at the 2016 Bath Literature Festival, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was named the best coming-of-age novel of all time (Clark).

variety in the American coming-of-age narrative, it is nearly impossible to use these canonical texts to describe a "typical" coming-of-age plot, process, or protagonist.

And yet, as Joseph Slaughter argues, we know a coming-of-age novel when we see it; despite the striking differences across these well-known texts, they all remain easily identifiable as bildungsromane. The genre's different narrative trajectories have remained widely recognizable over centuries, despite vast cultural differences across time periods and geographic settings; despite formal innovations; and despite a diversification of protagonists to include immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and queer subjects. Though these coming-of-age novels may take very different forms, most of them, from *Wilhelm Meister* to the novels of today, contain a few key tropes or characteristics that serve to identify them as participating in the genre. I outline some of these oft-repeated tropes here: protagonists usually gain knowledge or make a discovery that alters how they see the world (often producing an identifiable moment of transition between so-called "innocence" and "experience," youth and adulthood); they have a transformative romantic or sexual experience; they come to terms with a parent's absence or shortcomings; and they develop a growing sense of what they want and what they value. In many texts, protagonists also embark on a physical journey that mirrors their interior journey of development, and often, protagonists explore—and challenge—their given place in society. So, while we of course expect to see changes in the coming-of-age process since Brontë's day, the surprisingly strong continuity of these tropes invites a comparative genre study that takes the long view.

Today's authors not only repeat these generic traits but also revise them, sometimes dramatically. I write this dissertation with an eye to these revisions, concentrating my analysis on recent stories of female bildung from the past decade, and especially since 2010. My focus on contemporary texts is, in and of itself, an intervention into the longstanding debate over the bildungsroman's endurance. Departing from critics like Moretti and Sammons who find the genre outdated, I take as a central premise that the bildungsroman genre endures because it is constantly evolving—undergoing its own process of bildung, even—to explore the concerns of its day. Just as *Girls* may symbolize the twenty-first century's intense cultural interest in female identity formation—*The Atlantic* credited the show with offering an astute and "surprising definition of adulthood"—today's literary fiction is also deeply concerned with understanding and redefining girlhood, womanhood, and the timing of the transition between them (Kornhaber). Susan Ashley Gohlman points to narrative revisions as keeping the genre perpetually timely:

> *Wilhelm Meister* may seem romantic and outdated to readers today, and perhaps it is. It is in the nature of the Bildungsroman to become 'dated' because it is based on the idea that nothing in the external world remains constant. The particular Bildungsprozess that was right for Wilhelm would not and could not be right for the individual growing up twenty, fifty, or a hundred years later. (20)

As Gohlman suggests, the "nature" of the genre is mutable. It is fitting, then, that scholarship on the bildungsroman has long been concerned with redefining, refining, and stretching the genre. While the earliest bildungsroman scholarship focused on the genre

in its native Germany, Susan Howe's 1930 work *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen* brought critical attention to the genre's spread to England. Then, in the widely cited (and widely contested) *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), Jerome Buckley attempted to trace the development of the English bildungsroman canon (plus Joyce). The conception of the genre that Buckley offered was so loose that Sammons complained he was using the bildungsroman label as "a storage bin," yet Buckley also offered a stepwise account of the "typical" bildungsroman plot trajectory so detailed and rigid that it excludes many traditional examples of the form.[10]

Since the 1970s, scholarship has stretched the genre in ever new directions, expanding the conception of the bildungsroman to include historically marginalized subjects such as women and minorities. Before the era of feminist criticism, nearly every definition of the genre excluded women (and, implicitly, non-white men). Dilthey, for instance, considered the genre to be the story of "a young man" (308); Mikhail Bakhtin described the genre as depicting "the image of man in the process of becoming" (19); and Buckley's famous sketch of the bildung trajectory used only male pronouns. But of

[10] Since so many scholars take up—and take issue with—Buckley's definition, it is worth quoting in full: "A child of some sensitivity grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impervious to the new ideas he has gained from unprescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (in the English novels, usually London). There his real "education" begins, not only his preparation for a career but also—and often more importantly—his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice" (17-18).

course, from *Jane Eyre* to *Middlemarch* to *The Bell Jar*, literature has also captured the bildung of women, and far more than these scholars' definitions ever allowed; indeed, in *Seasons of Youth*, the same book in which he provides his male-centered definition of the genre, Buckley also discusses Maggie Tulliver's development in a chapter on *The Mill on the Floss*. In *The Voyage In* (1983), a collection of feminist analyses of the bildungsroman, editors Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland draw attention to nineteenth- and twentieth-century bildungsromane with female subjects, exposing the near-total exclusion of women from extant critical conceptions of the bildung process. Although *The Voyage In* was widely considered groundbreaking, it has also been critiqued for what Pin-Chia Feng calls its "unconscious cultural hegemony of early feminist criticism which centers around white, middle-class women's issues" (13). Since the 1980s and 1990s, scholars like Feng, Stella Bolaki, Martin Japtok, Gunilla Theander Kester, and Greta LeSeur, among many others, have concentrated on the bildung experiences of ethnic and racial minority subjects. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin rightly observes that a bildungsroman with ethnic subjects "evinces a revaluation, a transvaluation of traditional *Bildung* by new standards and perspectives" (75). I find that most contemporary bildungsroman scholarship, regardless of focus, is conducted in this same spirit of openness to multiple perspectives and sensitivity to the wide range of factors that shape identity.

Much scholarly attention to the bildungsroman genre, including many new contributions, has concentrated on a canon of texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. In this dissertation, I focus instead on texts of the far more

recent past, specifically the past ten years (2006-2016). Drawing on both feminist and multicultural approaches, I explore how authors are representing various kinds of female identity formation in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries.[11] Insights from scholars of feminism and multiculturalism enable me to read the bildung experiences of white and multiethnic female protagonists alongside one another, uncovering interesting particularities and resonances. My decision to focus on literary paths to womanhood is determined by our current cultural interest in female identity and development. Changes in our social and political landscape in the past half-century have had a far more profound effect on women's adult lives and options than on men's, and I explore how these changes may particularly shape our female bildung narratives. I also focus on women because, historically, female characters in literature have often served to expose the inequalities and double standards that exist along gender lines, particularly in regards to sexuality and opportunity. For instance, it is telling how differently Maggie Tulliver and Stephen Guest are received after the scandal of their shared boat ride in *The Mill on the Floss*. Even after Stephen takes public responsibility for attempting to trick Maggie into eloping with him, it is Maggie who is publicly shunned and then dies a pariah. Stephen, however, goes on to marry.

Because of recent dramatic changes in women's roles and their longstanding status as a heuristic of social inequality, bildungsromane with female characters offer a rich site for observing changes in the genre, and for exploring the cultural or ideological

[11] This look at very contemporary texts is somewhat unusual. Bolaki's 2011 book, for instance, explores contemporary bildungsromane, but the latest primary text she includes is Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, published in 1990.

significance of those changes. Susan Fraiman holds that the bildungsroman is, more than "the story of a character," really "the story of a cultural moment, its uncertainties and desires concerning women and *Bildung*" (144). Similarly, Douglas Mao explains that "one of the main things literature does is tell of the growth of an individual human being in a social context" (6). To best capture how the current cultural moment and social context influences contemporary narratives of female bildung, I thus limit my texts to those written in the past decade, between 2006 and 2016, with a major emphasis on texts published after 2010. My text selection is informed by a desire to feature diverse, wide-ranging illustrations of the American female coming-of-age experience.

The texts that I examine in this dissertation—Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Susan Choi's *My Education* (2013), and Patricia Park's *Re Jane* (2015)—feature protagonists whose ages range from fifteen to the mid-thirties.[12] They are white, African American, Korean American, and Nigerian; straight and queer; wealthy, working-class, and abjectly impoverished. They live in cities, in college towns, in rural backwaters, and abroad, and their narratives span from one week to nearly two decades.[13] With the exception of *The Marriage Plot*, which takes place during the 1980s, all texts are set at least partially in the twenty-first century. Several works draw attention to their contemporary settings by

[12] Significantly, *Winter's Bone* was made into a highly acclaimed film starring Jennifer Lawrence in 2010; its release drew new attention to Woodrell's novel, which, in this sense, further compresses the date range of my texts.

[13] While these texts are meant to capture a range of contemporary experiences and conditions that I observe in recent female bildungsromane, they are by no means comprehensive. For instance, while a number of these texts treat issues of mental health, physical disability is not well represented in these novels.

reference to historic events, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. In my quest to discover how womanhood and female identity formation are being represented in contemporary literary fiction, I did not disqualify authors based on gender: the bildungsromane in this study are written by both women and men. In this way, I depart from feminist studies of the genre, which typically focus on the works of women writers. In doing so, I challenge Buckley's view of the genre as usually "strongly autobiographical" (23).[14] Indeed, many of today's bildungsroman authors create coming-of-age protagonists who have a different gender identity than their own. Eugenides and Woodrell in this study have been celebrated for their depictions of female coming of age,[15] and Louise Erdrich and Donna Tartt have recently written award-winning bildungsromane with male protagonists. Thus, in the contemporary bildungsroman, gender identity is not a limiting factor for authors' fictional inventions, as they do not adhere to the conception of the genre as necessarily autobiographical. While critics like Feng, Bolaki, and Rita Felski have argued that nonfiction autobiographical texts can also be considered bildungsromane, I instead adhere to the conventional conception of the genre and limit my study to works of fiction.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "female bildungsroman" merely descriptively, not ideologically; my intent is simply to indicate that I am discussing bildungsromane with women protagonists. While I am deeply interested in the way that

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[14] Buckley argues that "as a rule," the bildungsroman is usually an author's "first or second book," making it difficult for young writers, themselves still close to youth, to write convincing bildung endings (24). Today's authors, however, engage with the bildungsroman genre at every stage of their careers.

[15] *Booklist* called Ree, the protagonist of Woodrell's *Winter's Bone,* a heroine who is "both irresistible and completely believable" (Ott), and in Eugenides's first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, the author was praised for rendering five sisters "as believable archetypes . . . without turning them into caricatures" (Barkhorn).

gender—along with other, often intersecting factors like social class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—is reflected in a protagonist's developmental experiences, I do not see male and female protagonists as requiring separate, inherently distinct coming-of-age genres, as was claimed by Abel, Hirsch, and Langland in *The Voyage In*.[16] These authors articulated their view of distinct male and female identities by citing psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow's 1978 claim that "[t]he basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate."[17] Yet, in our contemporary understanding of gender as constructed, fluid, and performative, this kind of rigid, universalizing claim seems out of date, if not dangerously reductive. In this dissertation, I want to avoid making overarching generalizations about gender and identity, even as I focus on texts that are centered on a single gender identity. Indeed, this resistance to gender essentialism is in part why I examine texts by both men and women.

My thinking about identity and identity formation is guided by the work of feminist critic Susan Fraiman. Unlike Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, who cite "belief in a coherent self" as one of the characteristics of the female bildungsroman, Fraiman encourages us to view identity as "a clashing, patchwork product" (12). In *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993), Fraiman offers the concept of "plural formations" to show the multifaceted mutability of identity, and to honor the ways in which identity "is differentiated in terms of, say, class, country, race,

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[16] In fact, the authors declared that unlike female versions of the genre, the bildungsroman had already "played out its possibilities for males"—something the existence of excellent contemporary bildungsromane with male protagonists, like recent texts by Tartt, Erdrich, Junot Diaz, and Colson Whitehead readily contradicts (13).

[17] Chodorow makes this claim in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (169); it is quoted in *The Voyage In* on page 10.

and time as well as gender" (12). Though Fraiman focuses on female narratives, she also suggests that her model may be helpful for a "reconsideration of 'male' texts" (13). More recently, in *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (2011), Bolaki uses the similar term "hybrid identities" to capture the fluidity of identity. Guided by this view of identity as multivalent, throughout my chapters, I attempt to uncover the various "selves" that make up each protagonist, and I explore how these different identities relate, interact, and clash.

By examining generic trends and ideological innovations in contemporary women's coming-of-age narratives in the United States, I illuminate and analyze a number of key revisions within the genre since the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century classics. Today's female bildungsroman subject is more diverse than ever—ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and in her sexual orientation. She also has an overall broader sense of opportunity, both in terms of the degree of education she can achieve and what she can become professionally, as well as her options for romantic relationships or remaining single.[18] Yet as the chapters that follow will show, this sense of wide possibility in bildung is not available to everyone. Instead, opportunity often remains tethered to social class and access to education, particularly higher education.

Further, the bildungsroman subject herself is getting older. While the genre traditionally focused on youth—Buckley, for instance, calls the bildungsroman a "convenient synonym for the novel of youth"—many contemporary authors are focusing

[18] While I point out this trend of widened opportunities for women characters, my chapters will provide a more nuanced discussion of the mediating factors that affect access to such opportunity. Poverty, immigration status, and racial and ethnic discrimination can make these opportunities enduringly out of reach for some women.

on the developmental experiences that occur after the more traditional developmental milestones, like turning eighteen, having a first romantic experience, or leaving home (13). Inspired by the word "*weiterbildung*," meaning "continued or further education" in the genre's language of origin, I thus offer the term *weiterbildungsroman* to capture the body of texts that explore the developmental experiences that occur *after* a protagonist reaches legal adulthood.[19] In his 2007 work, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, Kenneth Millard observes tentatively, "Perhaps, in fact, there is a trend in the bildungsroman of the early twenty-first century for characters to come of age in their twenties, where previously those experiences would have occurred during childhood and adolescence?" (5). With ten years' distance from Millard's hypothesis, I argue that this trend of older protagonists has grown far more conspicuous.

However, these older protagonists are not simply having the typical coming-of-age experiences *later* in life, as Millard postulates; instead, they are having different and more various experiences than their literary predecessors—educationally, romantically, and professionally. For instance, while the traditional bildungsroman often highlights the significance of a protagonist's first romantic experience, today's female bildungsroman protagonists often have multiple romantic relationships, reflecting more relaxed contemporary attitudes toward sex and female sexuality. The female protagonist may still experience a particular relationship or encounter as especially transformative, but this need not be her earliest such experience. In fact, in several of the novels under study in

[19] I offer thanks to Coleman Hutchison for leading me to this German word to capture my concept of continued bildung.

this dissertation, a protagonist's most significant romantic encounter is not her first, but rather the one she finds most sexually satisfying—a generic revision that reflects a new, progressive valuing of female sexuality.

The sense of wider personal opportunity and the extended timeline for development generated by these revisions brings us to the most dramatic and significant shift in the contemporary female bildungsroman: a radical change in its ending. My approach here is greatly influenced by the work of feminist critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), DuPlessis argues that "narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live" (3). Narrative endings, she explains, bring these ideologies into clear view: "Narrative outcome is one place where transindividual assumptions and values are most clearly visible, and where the word 'convention' is found resonating between its literary and its social meanings" (3). In nineteenth-century texts, the narrative conclusions available to female protagonists were usually marriage or death, reflecting the narrow scope of options available to women. DuPlessis finds that romance and bildung plots of this time are invariably at odds with each other; the romance plot, she argues, effectively "muffles the main female character" and "represses quest" in order to "incorporate" a woman within a romantic partnership (5). In this way, DuPlessis says, the romance plot functions as "a trope for the sex–gender system as a whole" (5). Yet in the twentieth century, DuPlessis discovers, authors creatively protest this system with a technique she calls *writing beyond the ending*—that is, inventing new narrative options for women. Some of these "transgressive" narrative strategies include a

focus on "woman-to-woman and brother-to-sister bonds" and "forms of the communal protagonist" (like the "collectivized sisterhood" in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's 1915 utopian novel *Herland*) (5, 180). A specific example of *writing beyond the ending* that DuPlessis offers comes in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where the "kinship of a Tory hostess and her 'double' Septimus" becomes "a structural coup, the creation of an unsexual, nonromantic central couple" (57). DuPlessis argues that Clarissa's spiritual identification with Septimus "displaces heterosexual love from the narrative center" (57). Borrowing DuPlessis's lens, I find that another group of twentieth century authors *write beyond the ending* far more bleakly: in the final pages of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), the female protagonist, though neither married nor dead, feels disillusioned, isolated, disconnected, or betrayed.

This dissertation interrogates how a new set of contemporary authors uses narrative conclusions to expose the ideologies that shape today's representations of bildung and identity, girlhood and womanhood. That is, I explore how today's authors are and are not *writing beyond the ending* of traditional bildungsromane. In light of the revisions of the contemporary female bildungsroman protagonists' age, educational and professional opportunities, and attitudes toward sexuality and marriage, what are today's narrative endpoints? As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, many recent female bildungsromane have conclusions that are conspicuously open-ended and future-oriented, rather than ending in marriage, death, or disillusionment. In his famous 1987 study of the European bildungsroman, Franco Moretti claims, "A *Bildung* is truly such

only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as *concluded*: only if youth passes into maturity, and comes there to a stop" (26).[20] In Moretti's reading, adolescence must end definitively in a concrete, mature, adult identity—a conception of adulthood that leaves no room for a phenomenon like the Boomerang Generation. Contra Moretti, authors today eschew traditional endpoints for their female protagonists, suggesting and often celebrating the opportunity for protagonists' further development and personal exploration.

This kind of flexible, "in process" narrative resolution, evidenced in my diverse group of texts, dramatically contradicts Moretti's claim. It also reflects, I argue, a contemporary view of development as a continual experience, rather than a discrete stage that is confined to youth. Implicit in the view of development as an ongoing process is a sense of hopefulness. Though that hope may be tentative, it marks many of today's texts, even those that feature traumatic conditions and hardship. The contemporary female bildungsroman's forward-looking, open endings suggest that today, individuals simply have more time and opportunities to find their way: identity formation continues beyond the threshold of legal adulthood, and after romantic ruptures, loss, or personal trauma. The path to adulthood is more varied, and often longer, than in the past.

The optimism in all six novels' open endings, however tentative, is also revisionary. Buckley finds in his study that many bildungsromane end "with an open question about the hero's final choice," and this ambiguity, in turn, means that few protagonists "reach a recognizably happy ending" (23). He cites Joyce's *A Portrait of the*

[20] Moretti famously hailed the bildungsroman as "the symbolic form" of modernity (5), and argued that the genre's narrative focus on youth helped assuage fears about the "unpredictability of social change" by representing it as a temporary period (230).

Artist as a Young Man as an example of such an ambivalent ending (23). Yet, for contemporary protagonists, undoubtedly influenced by a conception of development as ongoing, it is precisely the open question about the subject's final choice(s) that ultimately gives these novels a sense of hopefulness. A female protagonist's belief that she has more time to develop, change, and explore her multiplicity of forms is today's version of a "happy ending." The positivity I read in this open-endedness also contrasts with what Esty observes in the modernist bildungsroman. *In Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development (*2011), Esty examines bildungsromane with colonial and imperial settings and argues that "[r]apidly modernizing societies produce novels of troubled growth and failed *Bildung*" (208). Looking at novels written between 1880 and 1920, Esty shows that a protagonist's development in youth becomes stagnant ("frozen youth") or perpetual ("endless youth"), with both conditions frustrating narrative closure and obscuring a protagonist's view of the future (27, 45).

The open, hopeful endings of my contemporary body of texts also reveal what contemporary authors see as the most important goals of bildung. While the genre once celebrated tidy closure through marriage and motherhood or, alternatively, through installation in an "appropriate" career path, today's authors frequently privilege more abstract markers of development, such as a protagonist's increased agency and empowered decision-making, her broadened sense of personal potential, her feelings of being at peace with herself, and her future opportunities for continued development. (Some of these new markers of adulthood recall those cited by psychologist Arnett:

"accepting responsibility for one's actions, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent" [vi].) Significantly, some of these texts *do* feature the traditional endpoints of marriage, motherhood, and career, yet these markers are shown to be more like *midpoints* of development, not necessarily the determinants of a woman's identity or life course. Indeed, in all of my texts, romances rupture, jobs are abandoned, dreams and plans are revised. Adulthood and adult identity are shown to be moving targets, and the open endings of all six novels in this study celebrate the hope that growth can continue into and throughout adulthood.

The generic and ideological trends I uncover throughout this dissertation ultimately lead me to a revised definition of the bildungsroman. While I point out that the bildungsroman protagonist is now often older than in the past—frequently already a legal adult—and though I believe novels' open endings reflect a contemporary view of development as continuous, I do not think that every novel that explores personal growth, change, or development qualifies as a bildungsroman. Indeed, as Frederick Amrine cautions, "if one takes 'Bildung' in its strict and limited historical sense, then nothing is a *Bildungsroman*—not even *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; but if one takes it in the loose sense, something like 'development of the protagonist,' then *everything* is a Bildungsroman" (127). I offer a definition not to be restrictive or exclusionary, but in the spirit of Adena Rosmarin's pragmatic approach to genre, which she sees as an "explanatory tool":

> [O]nce genre is defined as pragmatic rather than natural, as defined rather than found, and as used rather than described, then there are precisely as many genres

> as we need, genres whose conceptual shape is precisely determined by that need. They are designed to serve the explanatory purpose of critical thought, not the other way around. (25)

So, based on my survey of many recent bildungsromane and my analysis of select primary and comparative texts, I developed a new working definition of the genre. This definition will hopefully be of continued use in comparative scholarship in the genre, even as it is modified over time in light of new texts and insights. My quest for a simplified, inclusive definition of the bildungsroman began with Esty's helpful description of the genre: bildungsromane feature "youthful protagonists whose growth is central and conspicuous, either as a narrative presence or a genuinely marked absence" (18). My revisions to Esty's categorization are two-fold: I expand it to include later- and longer-blooming heroes by eschewing words like "youth" or "adolescence," and I incorporate what I see as a common self-consciousness in a protagonist's developmental process. Thus, my purposefully broad, working definition for this dissertation is as follows: *In the bildungsroman, a protagonist has thoughts, feelings, or experiences that meaningfully contribute to or revise her conception of her "adult" identity.* What I hope to capture in this definition is the genre's enduring interest in the transition and transformation that occurs between adolescence and adulthood, and to reflect the new, extended timetable for such change. In my view, the bildungsroman remains oriented toward a fulfilling *adult identity*, but adulthood is now understood to be more complex and multifaceted than ever before. Another purpose of this definition is to distinguish the development of legal adult protagonists in the *weiterbildungsroman* from what other

scholars describe as the "secondary" coming-of-age experiences of protagonists in middle and even old age.[21]

Throughout this dissertation, I explore how authors are representing coming of age for women today by engaging with many of the same tropes and sites of identity formation found in traditional versions of the genre. In each of my three chapters, I tease out these generic revisions by focusing on a particular trope of the classic bildungsroman—education, migration and mobility, and social class. Through focused close readings, I analyze how contemporary modifications to these tropes correspond to revisions in the ways that today's female protagonists view themselves in the world. These generic recapitulations illuminate how today's authors reinvent and renew the genre.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, which focuses on education, I demonstrate that the new female bildungsroman commonly reconfigures this traditional bildungsroman trope as higher education. The advanced educational settings of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011) and Susan Choi's *My Education* (2013) emphasize that the protagonist of the

[21] For instance, in *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel* (1988) Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues for a separate generic category for the "midlife Bildungsroman," novels that feature the ongoing development of middle-aged protagonists "who have already struggled through the testings of youth and who now set forth on different and more challenging roads of trial" (12). Barbara Frey Waxman pushes the age boundaries even further in *From the Hearth to the Open Road* (1990), introducing the term "Reifungsroman, or novel of ripening" (2) to describe novels that emphasize the fruitful development of women in old age. In *Beyond Innocence, Or, The Altersroman in Modern Fiction* (1997), Linda A. Westervelt similarly studies the development of aging protagonists in what she calls the "altersroman."

female American bildungsroman is getting older, and the novels thus serve as examples of what I have coined the *weiterbildungsroman.* The campus settings of these novels also demonstrate that today's female protagonists are often pulled toward intellectual work, especially in literature. In striking contrast to heroines of the past, these protagonists tend to view their academic and professional opportunities as vast. In both novels, the pursuit of higher education spurs not only intellectual development, but also intense romantic relationships. These relationships, and especially their eventual ruptures, are depicted as part of the important learning of coming of age. Ultimately, both protagonists begin to move forward from their traumatic breakups by returning to intellectual pursuits as single women, and this contributes to a sense of their development as ongoing. This new setting for the contemporary female bildungsroman, the institution of higher education, is significant because women today have new opportunities (educational and otherwise) for development, and because women may have their most formative developmental experiences in their twenties or even thirties, *after* conventional developmental milestones like finishing adolescence or leaving home for the first time.

In Chapter Two, I show that a number of new female bildungsromane revisit the traditional bildungsroman trope of migration and mobility through the lens of international immigration. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Patricia Park's *Re Jane* (2015), two *weiterbildungsromane* with adult protagonists, immigration to the US is depicted as a fluid and multidirectional process. In each novel, the protagonist's journey of development is profoundly shaped both by her status as an immigrant and by her global geographic flexibility (a flexibility dramatically heightened

by access to air travel and electronic communication). Geographic mobility often results in a personal malleability, and each protagonist finds her identity changed based on her physical location in the world. As I argue, this geographic flexibility offers benefits, like the opportunity for personal reinvention and new relationships, but it also carries risks, like being marked as a racial or ethnic outsider and facing discrimination. Ultimately, each protagonist's varied experiences and growing sense of personal and geographic fluidity offers her a more expansive view of her future. This empowered outlook is reflected in the texts' hopeful, open endings. The contemporary female bildungsroman's revised view of migration as global, flexible, and multidirectional is significant because for women today, an "American" identity may be a hybrid identity, simultaneously tied to multiple places, and because many women in the US continue to endure racial and ethnic othering that affects identity formation.

In Chapter Three, I show that a number of new female bildungsromane revisit the traditional bildungsroman trope of social class and upward mobility by focusing on environments of deep poverty. In Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006), teenage protagonists live in such abjectly impoverished, neglected conditions that their attention is laser-focused on daily survival. In the novels, the effect of being "lower" class is to have a limited sense of opportunity and a foreshortened view of the future, an experience that the authors emphasize formally through the use of compressed narrative timeframes. The chapter analyzes how Ward and Woodrell depict poverty's profound influence on identity formation, focusing on the protagonists' young ages, their prematurely "adult" concerns, and the authors' narrative

attention to material goods and the girls' bodies. The young women's environments of deprivation challenge the genre's traditional focus on upward mobility, and thus I consider what possibilities these bildungsromane present for development and ambition in dire poverty. In both novels, the resourceful teens find ways to get their needs met, and they ultimately discover, when they are offered and accept aid from others, that they can entertain slightly more expanded, hopeful views of their own futures and opportunities for continued personal development. The novels' revision of the traditional bildungsroman focus—from class and class mobility to the conditions of deep poverty—is significant because class continues to structure, and even to determine, women's opportunities for development today. Persistent economic inequality in the US continues to constrain the development of many young citizens, particularly amidst the disappearance of the middle class.

Finally, in a brief coda, I consider directions for future research on the bildungsroman genre and offer a reflection on its enduring popularity among readers and writers. It is unsurprising that critics today still compare new coming-of-age novels to *The Catcher in the Rye* or *To Kill A Mockingbird*—these stories have demonstrated continued cultural resonance and appeal. However, by bringing together in this dissertation a set of contemporary texts about female identity formation, and gesturing to a host of other recent texts, I hope to show how the centuries-old bildungsroman genre remains vibrant, timely, and culturally illuminating today. At this moment of deep interest in girlhood and womanhood, these diverse novels reveal how contemporary authors intervene in discussions of coming of age by offering new goals, obstacles, and

pathways for maturation and adulthood. In doing so, they help us see what it means to grow, live, and be “grown up” in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: The Education Americans—
Knowledge & Identity in *The Marriage Plot* and *My Education*

Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced—Even a Proverb is no Proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it.

—John Keats, letter to George and Georgiana Keats, March 19, 1819

Reflecting on his experience at Brown University in the early 1980s, Jeffrey Eugenides describes college as a time of rich personal exploration: "You are trying to figure out what you thought and who you like and how you are going to live." For Eugenides, two means of self-discovery are particularly salient: literature and love. He describes reading in college as "passionate," and books as "almost like drugs you would take and ingest." He describes love in similar terms, as a kind of spell, noting that many people in college "fall tempestuously in love" with an "intoxicating" person. In fact, he says, such love affairs often felt like "one of the major achievements or activities of college." Even though this kind of early, intense relationship usually ruptures, Eugenides reflects, the experience leaves an enduring impression: "it kind of gets under your skin" (Cathcart).

In this chapter, I interrogate how today's authors explore the ways in which education, romance, and especially romantic ruptures "get under the skin" of their female bildungsroman protagonists and shape identity formation. I pair Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011) with Susan Choi's *My Education* (2013). Both are recent bildungsromane set at institutions of higher education. In each novel, the female protagonist nurtures scholarly dreams, falls deeply in love, and grows unsure about her

adult goals and path. Both texts also feature traditional markers of adulthood that are becoming ever less common in the contemporary female bildungsroman: both protagonists marry, and Choi's Regina becomes a mother. Yet even as Eugenides and Choi engage with these conventional tropes of bildung, they revise and extend their contours to reflect women's expanded professional, educational, and social opportunities today.

The word "bildungsroman" is often translated as a "novel of education," and fittingly, in many traditional bildungsromane, intellectual encounters and institutions of learning facilitate protagonists' development. It is through literature, art, and schooling that classic heroes like Wilhelm Meister, Stephen Dedalus, and Jude Fawley first came to know themselves and recognize their ambitions. Traditionally, bildungsroman educational experiences have tended to be located in primary or secondary school, as protagonists' stories often begin in childhood and adolescence. We see this trajectory in *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In the US, the coming-of-age genre most typically features high school-aged protagonists, as in classic texts like *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *A Separate Peace* (1959), and more recently, in Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005) and Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012). The texts I examine in Chapter Three, Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006) and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), also feature protagonists in their mid-teens, though significantly, Woodrell's hero has already dropped out of school.

Despite the wide-ranging educational ventures of male protagonists throughout history, for women and their fictional counterparts, educational opportunities have historically been limited. Not only were women traditionally excluded from formal schooling, they were also culturally excluded from many other pathways for knowledge—professional, experiential, or sexual. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars began examining the ways in which these restrictions have influenced identity formation for female protagonists. In their 1983 anthology *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, editors Abel, Hirsch, and Langland demonstrate that women are fundamentally excluded from critical conceptions of nineteenth-century bildung, which "presuppose a range of social options available only to men" (7). They begin by critiquing Buckley's well-known description of the typical bildungsroman plot. In Buckley's model, a sensitive, creative boy, stifled by his local environment and unsatisfied by his education, embarks on a quest to the city. There, he learns through engagement and exposure, gaining professional, urban, and romantic experience. After a period of "painful soul-searching" to discover his desires and his values, he reaches adulthood, which is defined as finding his rightful place in society (Buckley 17). As Abel, Hirsch, and Langland point out, every step of the developmental trajectory Buckley outlines was traditionally unavailable to women, who could neither travel independently nor have romantic relations outside of marriage without risking "expulsion from society" (8). For nineteenth-century women, *coming of age* usually meant only an "exchange [of] one domestic sphere for another" (8).

This gendered inequality is captured by George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Protagonist Maggie Tulliver is a bright and inquisitive child, so deeply drawn to literature that she reads the dictionary when she runs out of books at home. Yet her family's attention and resources are concentrated primarily on the education of her less bookish and decidedly less clever brother, Tom. Instead, Maggie is taught that women are innately less intelligent than men. Tom tells her that "Girls can't do Euclid," and his teacher agrees that girls' understanding is "superficial . . . quick and shallow" (169). With a limited education and limited options, Maggie becomes a governess in a "third-rate" school, where she mends clothes more than she molds minds (435). Romantically, Maggie is also constrained by her gender and by social norms. Her brother forces her to end a socially inappropriate relationship that had been a bright spot in her otherwise dreary existence. After this, she decides to save up money for more advanced schooling that might help her get "a better situation" (421). Soon, however, her reputation is ruined because she takes a boat ride alone with a man, and she dies a pariah.

Of course, the landscape for women has changed dramatically since Eliot's day, and these social and educational changes are reflected in contemporary stories of coming of age. As I discuss in my introduction, in the second half of the twentieth century, women's lives "changed more radically than in any other comparable period in history" (Rishoi 7). No longer confined to traditionally "pink collar" occupations like nursing and teaching, women have advanced in nearly every professional field, and the rates of US women pursuing college degrees have exploded: for the past four decades, women have outnumbered men on university campuses (Rouchelou). Women now also earn the

majority of doctoral and master's degrees (Perry).[22] Relatedly, women are marrying at a later age than ever before in history (the median age is now twenty-seven). For a range of ideological and circumstantial reasons, many are choosing not to marry at all: for the first time in US history, more women are single than are married (Traister 5). As a result, we find ourselves today in what Rebecca Traister calls the "epoch of single women"—a phrase she borrows from Susan B. Anthony (11). Women are also having children later in life; according to the CDC, in 2014, the average first-time mother was just over twenty-six years old, and more and more women are waiting until their thirties to have children (Leonard). In her 2016 book *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation,* Traister argues that without the cultural and financial "imperative" to marry and have children, women today have an "expansion of options" that is nothing short of revolutionary (9). In this chapter, I explore how this "expansion of options" is represented in the contemporary female bildungsroman, concentrating on generic revisions to a protagonist's age, educational opportunities, and romantic experiences.

One basic way that authors are exploring new opportunities for women is by making their protagonists significantly older than in the traditional bildungsroman: both Eugenides's Madeleine and Choi's Regina are in their early twenties, and the last section of Choi's novel jumps ahead fifteen years to show Regina at age thirty-six. These novels are thus examples of what I call the *weiterbildungsroman*, texts that shift the genre's

[22] However, men still outnumber women in STEM graduate study (Perry), as well as in business, law, and medical school education, though these imbalances have continued to shrink over time (Cohen). Men also continue to dominate executive leadership positions in universities, filling more than seventy percent of these roles (Seltzer). In a recent article in *Inside Higher Education*, Rick Seltzer puts this inequality plainly: "Higher education administration is still a man's world if you're measuring pay and position title."

traditional focus away from youthful development by featuring protagonists who are already legal adults. While we follow Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, Pip, and Stephen Dedalus from early childhood to adulthood, authors today often skip over childhood experiences altogether, instead concentrating on the rich and intense period of development in a protagonist's twenties and even thirties.

This shift to older protagonists affects the way that educational experiences function in contemporary bildungsromane, where the traditional trope of education commonly gets reconfigured as *higher* education—schooling that occurs after high school, once protagonists are already legal adults. Eugenides's Madeleine is a senior at Brown University, and Choi's Regina is in her first year of a doctoral program. The American bildungsroman has long highlighted college as a personal and educational goal for bright, ambitious female protagonists; leaving home for college is the unexpected happy ending for protagonist Francie Nolan, for example, in Betty Smith's 1943 classic *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.[23] But today's authors are increasingly following their female subjects onto the college campus. In addition to the texts under study in this chapter, other recent bildungsromane that feature university settings include Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), Hilary Thayer Hamman's *Anthropology of An American Girl* (2010), Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All*

[23] Other classic female bildungsromane whose protagonists pursue a college education include *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *The Bell Jar* (1963). In *Sula* (1973), Sula leaves for and later returns from college, but her education takes place offstage.

Completely Besides Ourselves (2013), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), a novel discussed in Chapter Two.[24]

This increasing focus on higher education reflects the changing sites of identity formation in the US. In *Inventing Modern Adolescence*, a study of the conceptual evolution of "the teenager" in US history and culture, Sarah E. Chinn shows how the physical sites for adolescent development and socialization have changed over time as cultural attitudes about development have also shifted. In the early twentieth century, for instance, working-class teens began staying in school several years longer before leaving for the workforce. As a result, Chinn says, the socialization that once took place in the adolescent workplace moved to the high school. Today, with college education an increasingly common rite of passage for US citizens—about seventy percent of students now go directly to college after graduating high school[25]—this socialization and development now extends to the university. In many ways, college has come to symbolize a liminal period between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, during which a young person who has left home still (usually) has financial and emotional support from her parents. In the US, college is often conceived of as a place for young adults to "find" themselves by forging relationships, discovering an intellectual or

[24] Novels that take place on college campuses are sometimes grouped together as their own genre: the campus novel. Campus novels can feature both student and professor protagonists, so the genre has a wider age range than is typical of even the *weiterbildungsroman*. Eugenides has resisted classifications of *The Marriage Plot* as a campus novel (Morris).

[25] For comparison, only about half of high school graduates in 1970 immediately went on to college. While college enrollment rates have since surged across all income brackets, lower income students remain less likely than middle income students to attend college right after high school, while middle income students remain less likely to attend college than students from high income families. To see changes in these figures over time, see: "Percentage of Recent High School Completers Enrolled in 2-year and 4-year Colleges, by Income Level: 1975 through 2014" from the Institute of Education Sciences.

professional passion, and preparing for a future career. Fittingly, the literary coming-of-age path now increasingly includes the university campus, particularly for the older protagonists of the *weiterbildungsroman*.

As this focus on advanced education suggests, today's female protagonists are drawn to intellectual work, and they feel a broader sense of their academic and professional opportunities than did earlier female protagonists.[26] Yet, as in the traditional bildungsroman, this intellectual curiosity almost always manifests itself as a passion for literature or writing. Subjects from David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, and Stephen Dedalus to Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* all felt an intellectual, sometimes quasi-spiritual connection with books and language from early childhood, and Eugenides's and Choi's contemporary protagonists were likewise drawn to books as children. Madeleine recalls spending hours in her parents' library, moved by the "the magisterial presence of all those potentially readable words" (20-21), while Regina describes her childhood self as "bookish" (34). However, in a significant revision of the traditional female bildungsroman, Madeleine and Regina experience their

[26] It is important to recognize, however, that educational opportunities in the US are still dramatically influenced by race, ethnicity, and social class—an unevenness that is emphasized in Chapter Three's explorations of deep poverty in the female bildungsroman. Madeleine and Regina come from privileged environments and never worry about paying their school tuition; they have "room" for big academic dreams. Education functions differently in bildungsromane depending on a protagonist's background. In texts with immigrant or first- or second-generation protagonists, for example, education can offer more than just intellectual fulfillment, instead presenting protagonists with a way to acclimate into American society and become upwardly mobile. This is seen in *The Bread Givers* (1925)*, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943)*, The House on Mango Street* (1984)*, Breath Eyes Memory* (1984), and in this century, *A Map of Home* (2008) and *Girl in Translation* (2010), texts in which educational success dramatically expands a protagonist's path. In other novels, education can be something that is denied to protagonists because of their social position, an exclusion classically shown in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and more recently, in *Swamplandia!* (2011) and Chapter Three's *Winter's Bone* (2006).

intellectual pursuits as essentially boundless. Unlike Maggie Tulliver and other women of the past, they are neither academically nor professionally constrained by their gender.

This broadened sense of personal options is evident in these women's pursuit of not just higher education, but the highest of education: Regina pursues a Ph.D. in English literature, while Madeleine goes from being an English major at an Ivy League university to enrolling in a graduate program in literature by the end of the novel. Both Eugenides and Choi thus present an updated educational goal for today's female protagonists. As a college education becomes increasingly standard, graduate and professional degrees become the new marker of intellectual and professional ambition.

In both *My Education* and *The Marriage Plot*, higher education settings do more than catalyze intellectual and professional development; they also spark influential romantic and sexual experiences. Eugenides and Choi take romance seriously as a site for deep personal learning, devoting far more pages to their protagonists' romantic relationships than to their studies. A first romantic or sexual encounter is a traditional trope of the bildungsroman, and historian Steven Mintz points to sexual initiation as "the single most important marker of the transition away from childhood and adolescence" in US culture (62). Yet female protagonists in today's coming-of-age novels, particularly the older protagonists of *weiterbildungsromane*, often have numerous romantic experiences and sexual encounters, reflecting a far more relaxed and empowered conception of female sexuality than in the past. These women are simply freer to explore: they can have multiple romantic relationships without the expectation of marriage; they can have premarital sex without fear of social stigma; and they have reliable means to

prevent pregnancy. And yet, despite this loosening up of the "rules" for female romantic experiences, contemporary bildungsroman authors still typically highlight a single relationship as being particularly formative or transformative for their protagonist's understanding of herself. This encounter or relationship need not be the heroine's first (or second or third) romance.

Indeed, Eugenides and Choi depict the entering—and eventually, the exiting—of a particularly intense and passionate romantic relationship as a rite of passage to maturity. Deep connection with a romantic partner helps each young woman feel actualized, and become more fully herself. For Eugenides's Madeleine, this identity-altering relationship is with a brilliant but troubled partner whose experience with mental illness draws her out of her privileged perspective on the world. She meets Leonard during her senior year at Brown, and her life immediately starts to revolve around him—loving him passionately, caring for him during his depressive episodes, marrying him, and then being left by him. For Choi's Regina, the key transformative romantic relationship is with Martha, a professor who is also the wife of Regina's academic mentor. Regina feels such a profound attraction to Martha that their relationship becomes the sole focus of her life; it prompts her to drop out of graduate school and leaves her wrecked when Martha cheats on her. The relationship is also Regina's first queer romantic experience, and in this way, Choi further illustrates a fluid, contemporary view of sexuality. For both Madeline and Regina, these powerful romantic relationships are also their most sexually fulfilling, emphasizing the connection between one's evolving sexuality and identity formation.

While Eugenides and Choi present the academic environment and the early adult period of higher education as a fruitful breeding ground for passionate relationships, the authors also show how academic learning and personal learning can collide and conflict. In each novel, the protagonist's educational trajectory becomes deeply entangled with her all-consuming romantic relationship, and this entanglement affects her academic and professional goals. The resulting tension is familiar from the classic bildungsroman: a tension between scholarly learning and personal learning, education and experience. Buckley's well-known description of bildung captures these different processes of knowledge acquisition. In his model, the hero leaves his rural classroom schooling for the city, and it is "[t]here his real 'education' begins" through the "direct experience of urban life" (17). In Buckley's view, romantic exploration is central to this "real"—or experiential—education, which also proves true for Madeleine and Regina.

For both protagonists, love quickly overpowers their scholarly pursuits. So, like Wilhelm Meister abandoning his business training to travel with a theater troupe, and Stephen Dedalus deciding to leave the country to become a writer rather than continue his studies or enter the priesthood, Madeleine and Regina are drawn to the classroom but find it somehow insufficient. Their romantic relationships begin to sap their energy for academic learning, and the scholarly pursuits that once sustained them become increasingly inconsequential. Madeleine becomes consumed with managing her boyfriend's manic depression, and she only resumes studying for the GRE and applying to graduate school at his urging, when he spurs her on during one of his manic episodes. Regina decides to quit her graduate program not for any new professional direction, but

because she thinks it will make her seem more "adult" in her older partner's eyes. The alternating liberation and devastation that the female protagonists experience in these relationships shapes their decisions about whether, when, where, and how to pursue education and professionalization. At times, these all-consuming relationships seem to limit Madeleine's and Regina's view of the future, as each struggles to imagine a life without her partner—a life, that is, as an independent woman.

Ultimately, both of these passionate relationships collapse, an event Eugenides and Choi present as deeply significant to the bildung process. The romantic rupture, too, becomes a new rite of passage for the contemporary female protagonist. Both authors depict the very intensity of these relationships as what makes them attractive yet unsustainable. Madeleine's marriage begins to unravel on her honeymoon, and her husband leaves her two months later. Regina's intense graduate school relationship collapses in less than a year. Recalling her own early adult romances, Choi reflects on the personal significance of love—and especially, loss. She explains, "I think love is big, and I think love that doesn't go well, it's also—it's kind of important" (Neary). Though Choi recalls how a romantic rupture can "feel like the worst thing that could ever possibly happen to you," she believes these painful experiences are also essential to personal development: they are "important to finding out who you are" (Neary). In *The Marriage Plot* and *My Education*, Eugenides and Choi both use "the big breakup" to explore how their protagonists react and respond to traumatic loss, and how they in time come to reimagine their lives, goals, and identities outside of an intense partnership. Feminist critics like DuPlessis have shown how romantic relationships in nineteenth-century texts

signaled the culmination (or really, the termination) of developing selfhood for women. But because the developmental path is now conceived of as longer and more continuous than in the past, in contemporary texts, romantic relationships and ruptures can be a part of the developmental journey without becoming an endpoint. As *The Marriage Plot, My Education,* and other recent texts make clear, in today's female bildungsroman, the marriage plot has given way to the break-up plot.

In both novels, when each woman's relationship ends, the way that she begins to move forward contributes to our sense of her development as ongoing. For both protagonists, it is the eventual return to the educational or literary setting that symbolizes this hope of further development. Deeply depressed after her husband leaves her, Madeleine moves forward with her plan to go to graduate school to become a Victorianist, and she is buoyed by her first scholarly publication. Regina also climbs out of her devastating heartbreak by returning to books—she gets a job in publishing and becomes a writer. Seizing the opportunity to professionalize, each woman begins to find her own independent place in the economy and the culture. For Madeleine, this personal development helps her recognize that she should be on her own rather than jumping into a new relationship. For Regina, whose narrative jumps ahead fifteen years, this growth allows her to finally release the past, and in turn, to feel new sustenance from her family life. On the final pages of each novel, both women begin to feel a sense of personal renewal, revival, or even rebirth as they make empowered choices to forge ahead after losses. This sense of continuous development contributes to the open-ended, hopeful endings of these texts. In this way, the authors optimistically contradict Moretti's view

that successful bildung can only ever be a process that halts entirely at the "end" of youth. Both Eugenides and Choi use the *weiterbildungsroman* to depict the ways in which women today may have their most formative developmental experiences in their twenties or even thirties, *after* conventional developmental milestones like sexual initiation, leaving home, and even marriage and motherhood.

The Marriage Plot—Deconstructing Literature, Love, and Loss

For her senior year at Brown University, Madeleine, the protagonist of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Marriage Plot*, had planned to be "studious, career-oriented, and aggressively celibate" (39). With the privileged, exploratory period of her college education approaching its close, Madeleine believed romance would only distract her from planning for her future. Despite her serious mindset, romance and academics collide in a semiotics seminar: Madeleine falls in love with her classmate, Leonard, "at a time when the French theory she was reading deconstructed the very notion of love" (19). The two begin an intense relationship, and over the course of a year and a half, they love passionately, break up, reconcile, marry, and are forced to face the realities of Leonard's manic depression. After Leonard is hospitalized on their honeymoon, the couple moves in with Madeleine's parents. As Madeleine prepares to start graduate school, deeply depressed Leonard leaves her in order to free her from the burden that he perceives himself to be.

Despite its title, *The Marriage Plot* offers neither a typical romance nor coming-of-age story. Generic revision was in fact part of Eugenides's aim. He shares, "Instead of

writing a marriage plot, I could deconstruct one and then put it back together, consistent with the religious, social, and sexual conventions prevailing today. I could write a novel that wasn't a marriage plot but that, in a certain way, was; a novel that drew strongly from tradition without being at all averse to modernity" ("How I Learned"). Though written in 2011, the novel is set at Brown University in 1982, a time when Eugenides himself was a student at the university. And while Eugenides plays with his own historical intimacy with that moment, particularly the famous clash over French theory in Brown's English department, he feels that the novel is otherwise "contemporaneous." He reflects that apart from having to exclude "cell phones and the internet," he "didn't feel any different writing this book than [he] would writing a short story set in 2010" (Schillinger).

Because I am interested in today's representations of women protagonists, not just those written *by* women, Eugenides is one of two male authors featured in this study, along with Daniel Woodrell, author of Chapter Three's *Winter's Bone*. Eugenides's two earlier works, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and *Middlesex* (2002) demonstrate the author's sustained interest in identity formation and gender identity. Surveying his oeuvre, Eleanor Barkhorn writes in *The Atlantic* that Eugenides "knows how to write women"—though she also critiques his portrayal of Madeleine as a woman without female friends. Barkhorn sees this as unrealistic, and a consequence of his male perspective.[27] Eugenides

[27] For more discussion of men writing women characters, see Michele Willens's 2013 article in *The Atlantic*, "The Mixed Results of Male Authors Writing Female Characters." In it, writer and poet Katha Pollitt echoes Barkhorn's criticism of Eugenides's Madeleine, noting "The female lead in Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* is the least interesting of the three major characters" (but of course, least interesting does not necessarily equate to least realistic).

himself has explained that he tries to write characters from an individualized perspective, not a gendered one: "I don't think in terms of a male or female point of view. I think in terms of individual people. I never write about 'women.' I write about one woman, or one man, or one intersex person. Fiction should be specific rather than general, because people are specific" (Gibbons). Throughout the novel, Eugenides thus pays attention to the specificities of Madeleine's various identities: as adult, romantic partner, scholar, daughter, sexual being, and woman.

Like Eugenides's *Middlesex, The Marriage Plot* has a complex, nonlinear narrative structure. It is written in the third person and moves across multiple perspectives and time periods, shifting back and forth from Madeleine's graduation day, to her earlier college experiences, to her first year out in the "real" world. Though Eugenides's narrative concentrates on Madeleine's experiences and evolving personal identity, it also features the perspectives of the two men who love her: her boyfriend, Leonard, whom she later marries; and Mitchell, with whom she shares an on-again, off-again friendship that is complicated by his unreciprocated romantic feelings for her. Many critics have drawn attention to what they see as Leonard's resemblance to the late David Foster Wallace (most recently, Marshall Boswell argues in a 2016 article for *Modern Fiction Studies* that "the references to Wallace are direct and irrefutable"), a connection Eugenides emphatically denies (501).[28] Though the novel effectively contains three separate bildungsromane, I focus my analysis on Madeleine's narrative, as does

[28] This comparison has been a source of frustration for Eugenides, who has forcefully refuted it in numerous interviews. Calling it a "rumor" that he is waiting "to pass by" (Grose), Eugenides states: "Anyone who reads Leonard's character and thinks it connects with David Foster Wallace's life is mistaken" ("A Conversation").

Eugenides: he devotes the most pages to her story, and he has described the book as "a novel about a young woman" (Cathcart). I draw occasionally on Mitchell's and Leonard's stories to interpret events and the narrative sequence.[29]

Throughout *The Marriage Plot*, the college campus is an incubator for Madeleine's self-discovery and personal development as she negotiates her desires, goals, and expectations for herself and her future. Eugenides depicts college as a place to explore and learn widely—about books, obviously, but also about oneself and the world. Throughout the novel, Madeleine's image of herself changes based on where she is, what she consumes, and how she is received by others. To Eugenides, this is the very work of coming of age: "when you're young, you're trying out a self and seeing if it works and if it sticks" ("'A Marriage Plot"'). As she develops, Madeleine tries on and shakes off new roles, an exercise that Eugenides emphasizes visually through her changing clothing choices. Early on in college, for example, Madeleine tries to stray from her preppy style and buys a vintage bowling shirt embroidered with the name "Mel." When Mitchell notices her new habit of wearing the shirt to parties, he teases, "What? Is that your arty shirt?" (182). He mocks the shirt's pristine condition, evidence of the artificiality of Madeleine's new image. Later, during her senior year, Madeleine observes that everybody in her semiotics course dresses in solid black. So, in response, and especially in an attempt to appeal to Leonard, Madeleine "began to dress differently on the days she had semiotics"—removing her diamond earrings, dressing in black, and hoping her

[29] For example, in a scene on page 67 where Madeleine first tells Leonard that she loves him and he replies flippantly, we know that she is furious; however, we do not know, until Leonard recalls the scene 182 pages later, that she broke up with him in that moment.

"Annie Hall glasses might possibly project a New Wave look" (41-42). Eugenides pokes fun at the irony of this performance: Madeleine is trying to project a new, carefully constructed image while studying signs and symbols. Later, when living on Cape Cod with Leonard after college, Madeleine resumes dressing in the "Kennedy-esque style" she finds most comfortable (181).

Naturally, the campus environment influences Madeleine's intellectual identity. Like so many bildungsroman protagonists before her, Madeleine feels a longstanding, personal connection with literature, and in reading books, she often finds insight into herself. Throughout the history of the bildungsroman genre—across differences in time and space and in the gender, race, and social class of authors and their protagonists—coming-of-age subjects have typically been prodigiously intelligent and precociously bookish. Stephen Dedalus is indeed "a young artist," closely attuned to language and sounds from his infancy. Jude Fawley is inspired by Latin and Greek grammar books to dream of attending university and becoming a scholar. Young Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* writes stories and poems, and she feels that literature will be her ticket out of her rough neighborhood; she imagines others will notice her leaving "with all those books and paper" (110). And in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, discussed in Chapter Three, Greek mythology serves as an escape from life's daily struggles for Esch, a pregnant black teen in Mississippi. Why do authors so frequently write bildungsroman subjects who are drawn to literature and writing? Considered from a biographical perspective, these fictional booklovers may simply inherit the literariness of their authors. Significantly, all six authors in this dissertation are what Mark McGurl calls "Program

Era" writers: fiction writers who earned MFAs. Further, many contemporary authors now spend their days on college campuses as instructors in MFA programs, a fact that may help explain not only their fascination with the fictional academic setting, but also the connection between higher education and literary ambition for their bildungsroman protagonists.[30] From a narrative perspective, literature can also be used to further a protagonist's introspection and self-understanding as she locates herself within the larger world.[31] The figures of Medea and Athena, for instance, help Esch begin to make sense of her own feelings and even her new future as a mother. Books can also provide a sense of connection for an otherwise isolated protagonist; the bildungsroman subject is often a loner, misread or misunderstood by others. Even Eugenides's Madeleine, privileged, beautiful, and bright, struggles to connect deeply with her family and college friends. When she and Leonard briefly break up before graduation, a distraught Madeleine turns not to her roommates but to the work of Roland Barthes, her "one consolation" (79). She even goes as far as to snuggle with her copy of *A Lover's Discourse* in bed. From this book, Madeleine finds not just connection but a mirror: "She recognized herself on every page. She identified with Barthes' shadowy 'I'" (79).

Eugenides uses Madeleine's deep engagement with texts to explore the relationship between her classroom identity and her personal identity. The more she learns in the classroom, the seemingly less sure she becomes about her intelligence,

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[30] For more on the rise of the MFA program and its influence on fiction and higher education, see McGurl's 2009 book *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing.*

[31] Millard argues that an important part of coming of age is finding one's place not only in the immediate world, but also in history (something he feels is especially significant for American protagonists in light of the United States' comparatively short history). Reading can certainly provide the content and connections for this kind of personal and historical contextualization.

abilities, and purpose in the world. While Madeleine's passion for literature is depicted as innate and genuine, she comes to worry that her decision to major in English reflects a lack of direction or talent. Similarly, while college coursework exposes Madeleine to masterworks and theoretical concepts, it also breeds her insecurity about her own intellectual development as a student of literature. At Brown, Madeleine discovers that there is a difference between being a booklover and being a literary scholar. Feeling pressure to move from reading for pleasure to a form of engagement that is more sophisticated, or more "adult," Madeleine begins to feel "embarrassed" by her "fuzzy, unsystematic way of talking about books" (23).[32] Still, when her senior thesis on the evolution of the marriage plot is well received by her advisor, Madeleine feels encouraged to pursue graduate study in literature. Madeleine's confidence in her abilities and her goals for her professional future are thus deeply shaped by reactions from other members of this college community—and significantly, Madeleine focuses on the scholarly reactions of men: her advisor and semiotics professor are both men, and in her semiotics seminar, Madeleine is most concerned with Leonard's opinion and that of another male classmate. This anxious focus on men is thrown into relief by Madeleine's experience with women academics at a conference the following year. There, she feels meets a community of feminist scholars and feels personally and professionally buoyed by them: "Madeleine couldn't remember having a better time" (179).

[32] Yet Eugenides also pokes fun at the superficiality and elitism of scholarly identity construction, highlighting the faddish nature of literary criticism. For instance, Madeleine, a student during the heyday of critical theory, observes that in "college, people dropped names based on their obscurity," while in the real world, "people dropped names based on their renown" (23). Similarly, Madeleine amusingly hypothesizes that most semiotic theorists had been "unpopular . . . bullied or overlooked" as children, and so they "direct their lingering rage onto literature" by "demot[ing] the author" (42).

Madeleine's education at Brown comes not only from classroom learning, but also from extracurricular learning: she develops a life-altering romantic relationship with Leonard that provides insights that powerfully shape her identity and post-college path. Like many contemporary bildungsroman protagonists, especially *weiterbildungsroman* protagonists, Madeleine has already had a number of romantic experiences by the time the novel begins; yet her relationship with Leonard has a uniquely profound influence on her identity, development, and expectations of herself. Eugenides emphasizes the transformative nature of Madeleine's partnership with Leonard by tallying her previous romantic experiences:

> She thought she'd been in love before. She knew she'd had sex before. But all those torrid adolescent gropings, all those awkward backseat romps, the meaningful, performative summer nights with her high school boyfriend Jim McManus, even the tender sessions with Billy where he insisted they look into each other's eyes as they came—none of that prepared her for the wallop, the all-consuming pleasure, of this. (66)

Here Eugenides emphasizes the developmental nature of sexual and romantic exploration. Madeleine's experiences build from "awkward" to self-consciously emotional to their ultimate crescendo: ecstatic connection and sexual satisfaction with a man whose body seems to fit hers perfectly and whose demeanor moves her to shed her inhibitions. In describing Madeleine's relationship and sexual fulfillment with Leonard as a "wallop," Eugenides stresses the strength of the pair's connection by showing it as undeniable force, unlike anything that had come before.

Eugenides is explicit in his entanglement of Madeleine's academic learning (her "education") with her romantic and personal learning (her real world "experience"), showing both as important sites of bildung. Initially, these intersections are geographic: Madeleine first meets Leonard in class, finding him mysterious and magnetic. Then, a run-in at the university library, another academic site, prompts their first conversation—a conversation that illustrates how romantic pursuits can interfere with scholarly ones. Leonard asks Madeleine if she is at the library to pick up the Balzac course reading, and she is troubled to find her own literary thinking immediately paralyzed by his presence: "Normally, Madeleine would have had many things to say to this, many comments about Balzac to make. But her mind was a blank" (41). The relationship between scholarship and love only continues to deepen for Madeleine, as it is through a reading assignment—Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*—that she begins to realize her as-yet-unacknowledged and unexpressed feelings for Leonard. On that book's first page, Barthes explains that "the lover's discourse is today of an extreme solitude," and these words resonate deeply with Madeline:

> Here was a sign that she wasn't alone. Here was an articulation of what she had been so far mutely feeling . . . Madeleine was in a state of extreme solitude. It had to do with Leonard. With how she felt about him and how she couldn't tell anyone. With how much she liked him and how little she knew about him. With how desperately she wanted to see him and how hard it was to do so. (49)

Even after Madeleine and Leonard begin dating, Barthes's book remains an animated third party in their relationship. It even contributes to their first breakup. When

Madeleine tells Leonard that she loves him and is anxiously awaiting his verbal reciprocation, Leonard reaches into her purse for *A Lover's Discourse.* He finds a particular passage and, without speaking, gestures for Madeleine to read it aloud: "je-t'aime / *I-love-you*. . . refers not to the declaration of love, to the avowal, but to the repeated utterance of the love cry. . . Once the first avowal has been made, 'I love you' has no meaning whatever" (*The Marriage Plot* 66-67). While we later learn from Leonard's viewpoint that he had intended this performance to make him seem "cool and cerebral," Madeleine is humiliated and breaks up with him (though they reconcile a short time later) (248). This clash of romantic and scholarly knowledge is a theme that Eugenides has commented on in interviews. He describes Madeleine as a "woman who was reading semiotics, deconstructing language and trying to be cynical about life and love and, yet, who was very much in love with the ideal of true love" (Morris). In this moment when Madeleine articulates her feelings of love, Leonard communicates with his brain when what Madeleine wants is for him to use his heart.

Madeleine and Leonard's romantic relationship becomes the most powerful driver in Madeleine's life and identity. In some ways, this influence proves very positive. Though Leonard initially makes Madeleine feel unconfident and tongue-tied, his genuine interest in her ideas and feelings eventually begins to make her feel more deeply *herself*. He makes her feel heard, acknowledged, and recognized in a new way; Madeleine had "never met anyone, and certainly not a guy, who was so receptive, who took everything in" (60-61). Eugenides emphasizes the effects of this relationship on Madeleine's identity by describing it in physiological and psychoanalytic terms. Realizing that she had felt

only “half-alive” before meeting Leonard, Madeleine views their partnership as a personal awakening: “Being with Leonard made Madeleine feel exceptional. It was as if, before she’d met him, her blood had circulated grayly around her body, and now it was all oxygenated and red” (200). Similarly, the strength of her feelings for Leonard makes her feel “strangely displaced, not quite her usual tidy ego but merged with Leonard into a great big protoplasmic, ecstatic thing” (66). The pair’s strong sexual connection also contributes to Madeleine’s sense of symbiosis, as she feels a new depth to her sexuality and sexual satisfaction with Leonard. Throughout the novel, the couple’s sex life becomes a barometer for both Leonard’s mental health and their happiness as a couple. When Leonard is depressed or lethargic, they stop having sex altogether; when he feels healthy or is entering a period of mania, they have sex multiple times per day.

Madeleine’s sense of self and sense of purpose get even more deeply tied to Leonard during their brief breakup, when she learns of his hospitalization for manic depression—a diagnosis he had kept from her. Foreshadowing how she will soon come to prioritize his care over her own goals and dreams, Madeleine leaves her own college graduation ceremony early, before walking across the stage, so that she can get to the hospital to see Leonard. The novel’s narrative begins on the morning of this graduation day, and Eugenides emphasizes Madeleine’s overwhelming sense of directionlessness at this important moment of transition: she has a “feeling of being out of step, for this day and the rest of her life” (11). She has no job, has been rejected from the only graduate school to which she applied, and is heartbroken over her breakup with Leonard. Yet, when a friend of Leonard’s calls Madeleine to inform her of his hospitalization,

Madeleine immediately feels a sense of direction: Leonard. The couple reconciles at the hospital, and from that moment forward, Madeleine's identity gets defined by Leonard as she becomes his caretaker. This proves a fulltime job, and surprisingly, one that Madeleine enjoys at first. She finds that "Leonard's neediness . . . appealed to her so much" (170), and that it "was a rush to be needed the way Leonard needed her" (344).

Yet the fulfillment Madeleine achieves by caring for Leonard quickly becomes a double-edged sword, and her investment in the relationship begins to eclipse her academic and professional goals, and even her own individual identity. In the fall after she graduates, Madeleine follows Leonard to his internship on Cape Cod, planning to study for the GRE, prepare applications for graduate programs in English, and revise her senior thesis for publication. She makes little progress with these plans for the future, however, "for the simple irrefutable reason that her duty to Leonard came first" (179-180). Further illustrating how deeply Madeleine's identity becomes tied to Leonard's, her moods begin to mirror his—despite not sharing his diagnosis. When Leonard does not bounce back after his hospitalization, his depression begins to affect Madeleine's actions, sense of self, and her own mental health:

> It was as if, in order to love Leonard fully, Madeleine had to wander into the same dark forest where he was lost. There comes a moment, when you get lost in the woods, when the woods begin to feel like home. The further Leonard receded from other people, the more he relied on Madeleine, and the more he relied on her, the deeper she was willing to follow. (344)

Madeleine, like Leonard, starts to withdraw from life. She drops activities she once enjoyed, like tennis, and she dodges friends and family members to avoid having to give updates about Leonard's state. Her own anxiety is further exacerbated by the interruption of the timeline of her adult path. Out of college and living with her partner, Madeleine feels that "she had just started living like a grown-up" (166). But instead of feeling mature or independent, as she would have predicted, "she'd never felt more vulnerable, frightened, or confused in her life" (166).

In further illustration of the couple's connectedness, Madeleine follows Leonard not only into depression but also into mania, and this dramatically affects the next stage of her life. When Leonard, frustrated by the side effects of lithium, secretly reduces his dosage, his mood improves rapidly and his energy becomes boundless. In turn, Madeleine feels "a force much like mania" (339). She "had ridden a similarly cascading wave of emotion. She, too, had been insanely happy. She, too, had been hypersexual. She'd been feeling grandiose, invincible, and unafraid of risk" (339). During this time, Madeleine can finally see beyond her caretaker role to refocus on her own professional goals. She reapplies to graduate school, buoyed not only by Leonard's contagious new enthusiasm for life, but also by his tangible support—he fills out her applications and edits her writing sample. Significantly, it is in this blissful state that she and Leonard decide to marry. As Laura Savu observes, "A Jane Austen novel would end here, having nothing to say about what happens next, since it is what happens before marriage that matters." But in Eugenides's most basic revision to the marriage plot, matrimony is not a narrative endpoint. The proposal comes on page 293 of a 406-page novel.

In further departure from the traditional scripts of the marriage plot and female bildungsroman, Madeleine's decision to marry is presented as unconventional, rather than a typical narrative resolution. Its unexpectedness, reflected in others' reactions to her engagement and marriage, is due in part to her choice of partner (a man whose mental illness places great demands on her), in part to her relatively young age (Madeleine is twenty-two or twenty-three), and in part to the historical moment. Madeleine graduates from college in 1982, which means she was born around 1960. She is part of the first generation of young women to grow up reaping the benefits of advances made for women in the 1960s and 1970s. For this reason, Madeleine and the people in her life take it as a given that she will have lofty aspirations and a career outside of the home; in a sense, she experiences her opportunities as a woman as boundless. She is also aware and appreciative of the privileges of growing up in this feminist era, and she views her mother's own unrealized dreams as "the injustice [her] life would rectify" (32).

This sense of wide-open possibility for young women like Madeleine certainly contributes to the unsupportive responses she receives to her engagement. Her parents plead with her to reconsider being "tied down" at such a young age, while her older, unhappily married sister responds bluntly: "O.K., then. It's your funeral" (352, 353). Her friend Mitchell writes her an impassioned letter—which gets lost in the mail before Madeleine receives it—in which he forcefully reminds her that marrying at her age would be at odds with the goals she once set for herself. He writes, "You said you would never get married straight out of college. You planned to wait until your 'career' was settled and get married in your thirties" (324). Mitchell challenges her for not prioritizing her

professional ambition, and for ultimately being more traditional at heart than she has purported to be. He urges her to stop her "crazy wishes from exploding [her] life"—again emphasizing that she is too bright to so foolishly follow her heart (324). Another friend expresses more playful surprise at Madeleine marrying so young, exclaiming, "I can't believe you're married . . . That is so retrograde" (377). Madeleine's decision to legally bind herself to Leonard is viewed by others as regressive or even un-feminist.

Just as those around Madeleine view marriage as a "retrograde" choice for her to make at this stage in her life, so too has marriage become an increasingly unexpected choice for the contemporary bildungsroman protagonist. This shift in literary depictions of marriage mirrors larger changes in the cultural institution of marriage in the US. Women today marry far later than they once did; many divorce and then remarry; and more women than ever before never marry at all (Misra). These social changes are reflected in the way that marriage, dating, and sexuality function in *The Marriage Plot*. In Madeleine's various romantic relationships, she does not feel limited by traditional social or moral expectations as past heroines so often did. For instance, she and Leonard have sex on their first date, and they cohabit, unmarried, after being together for just a few months. Unlike Maggie Tulliver, Jane Eyre, and more recently, Esther Greenwood—women acutely attuned to how easily one's reputation could be shattered in society—Madeleine lives in a very different social landscape and is granted a far more liberated sense of agency and choice. Significantly, Madeleine *chooses* to marry Leonard when she does, and she refuses to let social or familial pressure constrain this choice. The anomalousness of her early marriage serves to underscore how powerfully she is affected

by their relationship. But it also emphasizes her youthfulness. There is a rebellious, adolescent quality to her deciding to marry Leonard. The narrator explains that Madeleine, young and in love, felt "invincible, and unafraid of risk. Hearing a beautiful music in her head, she hadn't listened to anything anyone else was saying" (339). She hid the news of her engagement from her parents for more than a month, and when they embarked on a letter-writing campaign to dissuade her, the only effect was that Madeleine realized "how powerless her parents were" to influence her choice (352).

Even as the time period in which Eugenides sets the novel contributes to Madeleine's broad sense of personal freedom, she also inherits some gender anxieties of the recent past. Eugenides illustrates this, surprisingly, with a tennis metaphor. As a child, Madeleine had watched with glee as Billie Jean King easily beat Bobby Riggs in the historic "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match of 1973. Yet when Riggs jumped over the tennis net after being routed, young Madeleine reflected, disappointed, "So how male was that, to act like a winner when you'd just been creamed?" (33). Madeleine experiences this sexism herself on the tennis court. She grew up playing tennis with her father, but when her skills surpassed his, his game strategy turned mental—he started "intimidating her, acting mean, disputing calls" (10). This strategy unfailingly caused Madeleine to lose each match, but it also had a deeper, more troubling effect: it left her "worried that there was something paradigmatic in this, that she was destined to go through life being cowed by less capable men" (10). Despite the array of options she sees spread out before her, Madeleine remains aware of the enduring inequalities she faces as a woman. Further, her worry that a man might stifle her dreams ends up being

unfortunately prescient. Though Leonard is brilliant, and when in good health, sensitive and generous, his capacity to be a consistent, supportive, and gainfully employed partner is often greatly limited by his mental illness. Though this circumstance is far more tragic than Madeleine's father's misogynistic attitude, Madeleine's life and development at this time are nonetheless circumscribed by a man.

Indeed, marriage does *not* offer a happy ending for Madeleine, as it did for Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Wilhelm Meister. Instead, she is married to Leonard for only two tense months before he leaves her. During this brief period, Madeleine's view of herself and her place in the world changes dramatically. When Leonard experiences a frightening period of mania during the couple's honeymoon in Europe, Madeleine recognizes that her passion for him had blinded her to the severity of his mental illness. Towards the end of the trip, Leonard disappears in Monaco. Police find him disoriented on the beach, missing his shoes and his front teeth. Once he has stabilized in the hospital, he and Madeleine return to the US and move in with her parents. Being married to someone who exhibits tangible symptoms of manic depression affects Madeleine profoundly, and Eugenides uses "retrograde" identity categories to record the rapid changes in Madeleine's sense of her own identity. For example, as a result of her intense anxiety about Leonard's safety during this short period, Madeline feels prematurely aged and hardened, "no longer a bride or even a young person" (368). Though she has been accepted to Columbia's graduate program in English, she identifies not as budding scholar or even as joyful newlywed, but rather as "the trembling wife, the ever-watchful custodian" (370). These labels emphasize the deep detachment that Madeleine now feels

from her independent identity and whatever plans she may have had apart from Leonard; and, further, they reveal her growing awareness of how the circumstances of her romantic relationship now shape her very being. Though she once said she did not want to marry until her "career was settled," now, at age twenty-two or twenty-three, Madeleine's sole way of identifying is as a worried wife. Eugenides also underscores the pressure and responsibility that she feels in this role after Leonard's mental health crisis: "She was *the thing* that stood between Leonard and death. That was how it felt to her" (371, emphasis added). Less than a year out of college, Madeleine's existence revolves around being alert to the warning signs of mania, to the extent that she loses herself altogether. Her worry even affects her bodily, as she forces herself to lie awake at night to watch over Leonard.

Madeleine's constant attunement to Leonard's condition strains her efforts to move forward with her education and career. The couple is supposed to move to New York for Madeleine to start graduate school, but she finds it deeply challenging to look forward to the future while Leonard's depression prevents him from having any kind of long view of life at all. For instance, while Madeleine is scheduling apartment viewings to find the two of them a home, Leonard is trudging around in the same pair of shorts he has been wearing for weeks on end. Leonard's depression leaves him painfully apathetic at the very moment Madeleine has hoped to feel renewed enthusiasm for her schooling and her future. The brief excitement she feels after signing a lease in New York, for instance, quickly gives way to a "rising feeling of hopelessness" when she recognizes that Leonard cannot—and may never be able to—share in that excitement with her (375).

Madeleine's identity and minute-to-minute life are so wrapped up in Leonard that any experience of joy amidst his despair seems almost insensitive.

Leonard, too, recognizes how the union of their lives limits Madeleine. Frustrated by his depression, he urges Madeleine to divorce him, telling her that in Islam, divorce can be achieved by simply repeating the words "I divorce thee" three times. Madeleine is hurt by this suggestion, and Leonard apologizes. But then, in the novel's most heartbreaking scene, Leonard, rendered lethargic and dispirited by his illness, performs this Islamic divorce ritual himself on a New York subway platform:

> Leonard turned and looked at her, his eyes vacant. He reached out and placed his hands tenderly on her shoulders. In a soft voice edged with pity, with sadness, Leonard said, 'I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee.' And then he pushed her back, not gently, and jumped onto the train before the doors closed. (383)

It seems both ironic and fitting that this relationship—which began at school and at times made academic learning feel comparatively unimportant—is ultimately severed by invoking esoteric religious knowledge that was likely gained in the classroom. Worried that he will never return to the version of himself who could feel happy and engaged, Leonard leaves Madeleine to free her. Indeed, at other points in the relationship, Madeleine secretly "fantasized" about being "selfish" and leaving Leonard for a partner "who was simple and happy" and did not require such extensive care (345). And in one moment during their honeymoon, she seems to seriously consider leaving him. Leonard, in his manic state, leaves their hotel without telling her. Terrified for his safety, Madeline attempts to physically chase him down. Yet when she spots him, standing "wild-eyed" at

a casino's blackjack table, Madeleine suddenly "had the urge to turn and flee. Taking one step forward would commit her to a life of doing the same . . . No one would blame her" (361-2). But instead, Madeleine resists this urge. Crucially, Leonard leaving Madeleine frees her both from the burden of him *and* from the guilt of deciding to leave him. In turn, Eugenides and the reader avoid having to weigh the ethical implications of such a choice.

Still, despite Madeleine's anxiety over Leonard and his effect on her future, she is devastated when he does leave her. She grieves, weeps, and stops eating. Living at her parents' house, Madeleine finds the reality of her adult existence so painful she attempts to regress, "to will herself back to girlhood" (402). Somewhat listlessly, she sleeps with Mitchell, the friend she knows has always been in love with her.

Yet with time, Madeleine begins to climb out of this debilitating sadness. Significantly, what pushes her forward is her first love: books, literature, and learning. This source of personal revival is especially meaningful in light of the ways that Madeleine's relationship with Leonard interacted with and sometimes overpowered her academic pursuits, as when studying for the GRE came second to caring for Leonard in his depressed state. Heartbroken and aimless after Leonard has left her, Madeleine finds that education is what offers her concrete steps towards restarting her life and imagining her future—a new future without him. In a first tangible move forward, Madeleine selects classes for her first semester of graduate school, and she decides to take it "as a good omen" that she is starting her graduate education at Columbia the very term that the university will welcome female undergraduate students for the first time (402). This, too, shows development from Madeleine's worry that it was her fate to be "cowed by less

capable men"—here, she trusts that the universe might better notice and affirm her ability and talents. Most significant of all, Madeleine is at last publicly recognized for her scholarly abilities when her revised senior thesis on the marriage plot is published in an academic journal. This academic recognition boosts her personal confidence: when she receives a copy of the journal in the mail, her friend Mitchell observes that Madeleine "looked happier than she'd looked in months" (403).

In giving education such a pivotal role in Madeleine's personal revival, Eugenides offers a new, contemporary variation of what DuPlessis calls *writing beyond the ending,* narrative strategies that deliberatively, often creatively, disrupt the narrative conclusions historically available to female protagonists: marriage or death. Significantly, Madeleine's soon-to-be divorcée status is not the only significant disruption of the marriage plot at the novel's close. In focusing on Madeleine's decision to return to the classroom and her growing optimism about this next step, Eugenides highlights the liberating possibilities of independent decision-making and the empowered pursuit of advanced education and a career. In his review of the novel, critic William Deresiewicz argues that little is made of Madeleine's ambitions and development, and the effect is that "she doesn't have a 'journey' as the others [in the novel] do." I disagree. Madeleine's step towards a career as a Victorianist—a term that, she feels, "made her fuzzy aspirations suddenly real"—is precisely what starts to revive her in this moment of loss (179). Though in the past, when Leonard was very depressed, she had once temporarily lost her resolve to apply to graduate school, she significantly does *not* reconsider her plans for graduate study during this period of her heartbreak.

And importantly, in the novel's conclusion, Madeleine is learning and reflecting still; her personal development is still unfolding. We see evidence of this ongoing change in Madeleine's response to a new romantic possibility. After she sleeps with Mitchell, we learn from his narrative perspective that he excitedly begins to imagine their life together and hopes to accompany Madeleine to New York. Yet in his own developing self-awareness and genuine care for Madeleine, Mitchell realizes that while their relationship would benefit his life, it might not benefit hers. So instead of pursuing Madeleine further, Mitchell offers her an opportunity to graciously reject the possibility of their romance. Using a literary parable, yet another explicit entanglement of academic and romantic knowledge, Mitchell asks her:

> From the books you read for your thesis, and for your article—the Austen and the James and everything—was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then they get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life? And so finally the guy doesn't propose at all, even though he still loves her? Is there any book that ends like that? (406-407)

When Madeleine replies that she does not know of any novel with such a plot, he pushes further, "But do you think that would be good? As an ending?" (407). After a few moments, Madeleine, "smiling gratefully," answers "Yes"—rejecting Mitchell without having to do so explicitly. In some ways, Madeleine's relative passivity here echoes her

breakup with Leonard, when he leaves her after realizing that she cannot or will not divorce him. Similarly, recognizing the fragility of Madeleine's current position, Mitchell, like Leonard, offers Madeleine liberation *from himself* so that she can develop herself. Eugenides has himself described this moment as orchestrated solely by Mitchell: "The love here is a love that allows Mitchell to give Madeleine away, or to give her her freedom in a sense" (Daley). In this view, Mitchell, and in turn, Eugenides, are the feminist heroes. But there is more to this scene than just Mitchell's literary proposal: there is Madeleine's response. Unlike in her rupture with Leonard, when he physically disappeared onto the subway while she was left standing on the platform, this time Madeleine does participate in the decision-making. Her "Yes" is in fact an empowered answer, expressing a decision to forge ahead on her own rather than partnering with someone who would make her feel comfortable and adored, but whom she does not love romantically. In a surprising final word to a novel called *The Marriage Plot*, and in contrast to Molly Bloom's climactic "yes I said yes I will Yes," Madeleine's "yes" is not agreeing to a marriage but resisting one (644). She may not run away, as Leonard did, but she certainly begins to walk. As Boswell observes, unlike in a nineteenth century text, Madeleine's "story does not culminate in marriage and the loss of her identity; rather, it ends with her independence. No longer a 'Victorian heroine,' she is free now to go to Columbia where she will become a 'Victorianist'" (514). Instead of (re)marriage, Madeleine chooses herself.

***My Education*—for "Love is tutelage, after all"**

At the beginning of Susan Choi's *My Education*, twenty-one-year-old Regina has just exchanged one university setting for another: she heads straight from college into a doctoral program in literature. Drawn to books since childhood like so many bildungsroman protagonists, Regina finds graduate school to be "her Eden," a place of discovery and pleasure (2). Graduate study also feels like a step forward into adulthood for Regina, and she revels in the new sense of maturity she finds in her advanced educational pursuit (2). Right away, Regina is as fascinated by the people and experiences of graduate school as she is by her course reading material, and indeed, as the novel proceeds, we see her academic and personal learning dramatically collide. As author Meg Wolitzer observes, Choi's novel "beautifully explores the way a young person tries, and often fails, to navigate her budding and intersecting sexual, intellectual and emotional lives."

These intersections—and failures—are first sparked when Regina enrolls in a class simply because she had heard gossip about the sexual escapades of its handsome professor, Nicholas. Nicholas then makes Regina his TA and mentors her. Yet, in defiance of our narrative expectations, Regina does not have an affair with Nicholas, but instead falls in love with his wife, Martha, another professor at the school. The two women begin a complicated, passionate relationship, which is Regina's first queer experience. As the partnership becomes an obsession for Regina, and the primary basis for her sense of self, she happily allows her academic identity to be usurped by her *in-*

love-with-Martha identity. Regina drops out of school to nurture the relationship, and when it ruptures, her very existence becomes defined by the loss.

Choi divides *My Education* into two distinct narrative time periods: the majority of the novel takes place in 1992, when twenty-one-year-old Regina begins graduate school, while the last third jumps to 2007, where we encounter thirty-six-year-old Regina living in New York City, married to a writer, and pregnant with her second child. The wide narrative timespan here, as in other novels in this study, proposes a more extended timeline for identity formation, with significant developmental experiences occurring well into legal adulthood. As narrator, Regina focuses almost exclusively on her adulthood, telling us very little about her childhood and college experiences. In a sense, she feels that the beginning of graduate school is the beginning of her "real" life. The thirty-six year-old Regina of 2007 occasionally comments on or judges her earlier experiences. For instance, she refers at one point to the "naïve righteousness" with which she had loved Martha (100), and at other points, she offers the reader insights with the caveat that they still "lay years in the future" for her twenty-one-year-old self (104). This narrative technique thus emphasizes the development that occurred in Regina's identity between her early twenties and mid-thirties.

Like so many other bildungsromane subjects, Regina is shown to be precociously smart—a characteristic that Choi emphasizes by giving Regina a nonchalance about her academic abilities and by weaving in others' praise of her intellect. We learn from Nicholas, for instance, that Regina graduated from college *summa cum laude,* and he calls her intelligence "exceptional" and her admissions essays "terrific" (18). A fellow

classmate also predicts Regina will make a "brilliant" professor (141). Like Eugenides's Madeleine—and unlike many female protagonists of earlier novels—Regina views her academic and professional options as unlimited. Indeed, she is pursuing an advanced degree by age twenty-one. Regina's open view of her future reflects the vastly expanded range of educational and professional opportunities available to women since the 1970s. Choi underscores Regina's sense of boundless opportunity and the innateness of her interest in literature by making a rare reference to her childhood. Regina's parents, owners of a small accounting firm, had hoped their daughter would pragmatically follow in their footsteps to pursue business. Given their own "untroubled indifference to literature and the arts," they were surprised by their daughter "turning out bookish" (34). It is striking that even though Regina was in no way groomed to pursue an advanced degree in the humanities and become a professor, she felt the option was available to her. By the end of her first term in graduate school, Regina finds that she is succeeding "by every available measure" (11, 74). As Nicholas says, Regina is filled with "nothing but brilliance," and we are shown that success comes easily to her (18). This fact makes it all the more dramatic when a devastating romantic breakup leads to her personal and academic breakdown.

Yet despite Regina's heralded intelligence, she is also presented as somewhat flat and unreflective—in many ways immature. Of all the protagonists featured in this dissertation, she offers the closest counterpart to the characters on *Girls*: she is bright but often entirely self-focused, and she experiences the world by impulsively acting and doing. In this way, Choi's novel also brings to mind Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person*

Be? (2010), a Canadian bildungsroman about a late twenty-something woman's narcissistic, self-conscious quest to discover the "best" way to exist in the world. Similarly, *Los Angeles Times* critic David L. Ulin describes Regina as "a woman so young (emotionally, anyway) . . . that she is almost literally unformed."

Further contributing to this sense of Regina's formlessness, Choi constructs Regina's development with minimal attention to aspects of identity on which other contemporary authors focus, like race and social background. For instance, Regina is the biracial daughter of a Filipino immigrant woman and an American man, yet this fact is mentioned just once and is not included in any of Regina's reflections on identity throughout the novel. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, bildungsroman authors have long used the genre to explore the relationship between racial identity and personal development. Reflecting an increasingly diverse US population, American bildungsroman protagonists have grown increasingly diverse over time, and the evolution of a heroine's racial identity is central to many recent coming-of-age texts. Choi's minimal focus on Regina's racial identity is in sharp contrast to Patricia Park's exploration of the profound ways that a biracial background affects Jane, the Korean American protagonist in Chapter Two's *Re Jane* (2015). Choi also deemphasizes the ways in which the trauma of losing a parent—a longstanding, enduringly common trope of the genre—can shape identity formation. We learn that Regina's father died unexpectedly when she was in high school, but her first-person narrative does not include any discussion of her grief or reflection on how his death affected her life. This, too, is very different from other contemporary texts like *Swamplandia!* (2011), *The Goldfinch*

(2013), and Chapter Two's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), novels in which a protagonist's own identity becomes wrapped up in grief over a lost parent. For Regina, however, family relationships do not seem to shape her early adult identity and development in significant ways, and this lack of attachment sets up how profoundly she is affected by romantic love. In effect, Regina's early formlessness sets up the basic developmental plot of Choi's "novel of formation."

Indeed, the most transformative relationship in Regina's early adulthood is a romantic one: Choi concentrates almost exclusively on how Regina's identity is changed by her relationship with Martha. Significantly, even though this crucial relationship is same-sex, and it is Regina's first relationship with a woman, sexual orientation remains peripheral to her identity, just like race and family background. The only important label or identity marker for Regina is "Martha's girlfriend." Regina appears completely unconcerned with categorizing or (re)defining her sexuality and sexual orientation in light of her new relationship. Regina does not, for instance, use the labels *gay*, *queer*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* to describe herself or the romance. Further, she calls the fact that she and Martha are both women "the least relevant factor of all," explaining that for her, it "failed to register" altogether (61). Choi describes the intense, immediate attraction between the women—who first kiss at a party hosted by Martha and her husband—as being outside of reason or existing nomenclature, catalyzed instead by instinct and "appetite" (61). Though the women have exchanged only a handful of words, they are so strongly attracted, physically and spiritually, that the gender of their bodies appears merely incidental. Regina describes the immediate ardor she feels for Martha as being

> so unto itself it could not refer outward, to other affairs between women or even between human beings. It was its own totality, bottomless and consuming, a font of impossible pleasure that from the start also bore down on me like a drill until at last it accomplished a permanent perforation. . . . I didn't love Martha for being a woman, and would have loved her no less had Shakespearean whim turned her into a man. (61)

Choi emphasizes that what is transformative for Regina is not the same-sex attraction, but rather, the particular pairing with Martha. And yet, their genderless, almost species-less attraction is also deeply embodied. Choi uses language of physical penetration to describe their union: their passion bears down like a drill until it creates an opening in Regina. Her self becomes perforated or punctured, foreshadowing how this relationship changes her permanently; the love she experiences cannot be unknown, and the hole it creates after the relationship eventually ruptures cannot be filled back in. The perforation, that is, begins to give unformed Regina form. Further, Choi describes the women's connection as an "it"—a distinct, almost otherworldly entity. Indeed, Regina later observes that she and Martha resembled "arrogant aliens" as they "groped and gasped over each other" in bars, too drawn to each other to be concerned about their public romantic displays (193).

Though Regina herself eschews labels, her experiences resonate with Eve Sedgwick's description of *queer*. For Sedgwick and other queer theorists, the construct of queerness captures the possibilities that open up when one's gender or sexuality does not "signify monolithically" (8). Sedgwick writes, "one of the things that 'queer' can refer to [is] the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and

excesses of meaning" (8). This queer conception of sexuality reflects a contemporary, progressive view of sexuality as flexible and fluid in nature. Significantly, just as Eugenides's Madeleine is influenced by the semiotics and feminist theory that raged when Eugenides was her age, Choi sets her novel in the early 1990s, the "moment" of queer theory. Like Eugenides and his protagonist, Choi is about the same age as Regina (she graduated from college in 1990, Regina in 1992), and the theoretical interest in queerness from Choi's days as a student seems to inform Regina's relaxed view of her own flexible sexuality. For Regina, there is an ease to this sexual flexibility; she feels free to follow her instincts and attractions without intellectualizing or overanalyzing them. This depiction of queer sexuality is distinct from what we see in earlier "queer bildungsromane," such as E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (published posthumously in 1971[33]) or Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), classics in which queer protagonists are ultimately punished by society for their sexuality. Regina's easy embrace of the queerness of her relationship with Martha is attributable not only to the contemporary age in which the novel is set, but also to the growing conception of early adulthood as a time of sexual exploration. Researcher Elizabeth M. Morgan observes that this period of "emerging adulthood" through one's late teens and twenties can be "rife with opportunities for exploration," and particularly so for "those whose sexuality might diverge from normative models" (263).

[33] Forster finished writing the novel in 1914, however, more than fifty years earlier. In a note on his draft, he wrote, "Publishable. But worth it?" (Fulham). Deciding that putting a novel about a romance between men into an unaccepting society would not be "worth it," Forster asked that it not be released until after his death.

Like many contemporary female protagonists, especially the older protagonists of *weiterbildungsromane*, Regina has already amassed considerable romantic and sexual experience by age twenty-one. We learn in the novel's opening pages that she began a casual sexual relationship with her graduate school roommate the day she moved in, and that she proudly considers her sexual past "quite epic" (61). Thus, though Regina had never kissed a woman before Martha, she had long felt uninhibited in her sexuality. In other recent bildungsromane, younger, sexually inexperienced protagonists have a far more complicated, troubled, or confused response to their first same-sex encounters. For instance, in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008), protagonist Nidali is left utterly bewildered when a tickling session with another thirteen-year-old girlfriend turns pleasurable. When she kisses another friend a year later, she longs to understand how or whether that act revealed something essential about her: "I replayed that kiss over and over in my mind, tried to figure out what it meant that I liked both girls and boys" (176). Similarly, in Eugenides's earlier novel *Middlesex*, young Callie is kissed by another little girl, and though she is just seven years old, she is "aware that there was something improper" in the feelings the kiss stirred in her (265). Then, while Callie and her friend later playfully entangle their bodies in the backyard swimming pool, her grandfather has a stroke. Believing she caused it, Callie prays and promises "never to do anything like that again" (267). By contrast, Regina feels no such guilt, blame, or confusion after beginning a sexual relationship with Martha, nor does she think her identity needs any particular adjustment or clarifying. In her review of the novel for *The New York Times*,

Emily Cooke points out the revolutionary nature of this portrait of fluid sexuality[34]: "This choice of subject matter is an exciting one, for if a number of the great novels of the past century have been stories of gay love, no really adequate literature of bisexuality exists."[35]

Indeed, far from feeling conflicted about her sexual attraction to a woman, Regina has a powerful, untroubled urge to be tied to Martha in every possible way. Her sense of self and sense of purpose immediately begin to revolve around their partnership. She asserts that she is "not the same person" she was before Martha—a belief that stems in large part from the sense of sexual, and thus personal, awakening she feels. Though Regina has no previous sexual experience with a woman, her attraction toward Martha outweighs any insecurity about her inexperience. She reflects to the reader, "Love is tutelage, after all; and . . . knowing nothing but what she'd just taught me, I was somehow no longer afraid" (77). Choi gives Regina exalted, almost mythical or spiritual language to describe the sexual pleasure she feels with Martha. Previously, Regina's orgasms had been "deep and ponderous things" that left her "calm" (77), but with Martha, she feels a "tormenting, self-heightening pleasure, like a hail of hot stones" that leaves her satisfied "down to [her] marrow" (79). Regina describes these sexual encounters as personally enlightening: "Martha . . . dredged a voice out of me I did not know I owned; the devastation of my pleasure surged outward and outward again, like an

[34] Cooke finds disappointing, however, what she sees as the novel's "timidity with the relevant political stakes," questioning Choi's insistence that Regina's and Martha's genders were irrelevant to their attraction.

[35] Since 2006, however, Lambda Literary, an international LGBTQ literary organization, has included categories for "bisexual writing" in their annual literary awards ("the Lammys").

ocean-floor tremor, while that voice I had never imagined was bellowing harshly Oh GOD, Oh GOD, OHGODOHGOD!" (77). Seismic sexual pleasure reveals to Regina new depths of her physicality, new sounds of her voice, and new sides of herself. Choi emphasizes that this "version" of Regina was latent inside her all along, but it was Martha who is able to mine for it and "dredge" it out. Just as Madeleine felt that Leonard finally made her blood "fully oxygenated" for the first time, Regina feels a similar naturalness to her partnership with Martha. She explains: "every cell that composed me had remade itself" (161). In both novels, sex proves a singularly powerful catalyst for self-discovery and development.

Though Regina's deep sexual satisfaction elicits a newfound sense of self-actualization, it also carries troubling personal consequences. On one hand, Regina becomes bolder and more fearless in her feelings, telling Martha, for instance, that she loves her after they have only just kissed for the first time. Yet Regina's feelings also make her lose sight of everybody else besides Martha. She is, for example, indifferent to the relationship's impact on Nicholas, the mentor who invited Regina into the home he shares with Martha, and from whom Martha separates a few months later. She also ignores the affair's impact on Martha and Nicholas's young son, even as physical reminders of the infant are present in Regina and Martha's earliest encounters. During one embrace, Martha, still breastfeeding, leaks milk onto Regina, who is not bothered but turned on. After another early rendezvous, Martha instructs Regina to hide upstairs while she goes to feed her son, but Regina disobeys and nonchalantly joins them in the kitchen, forcing an introduction to the baby's nanny and jeopardizing the secrecy of their affair.

Regina's love and passion make her feel more fully formed, but they also make her brazen and self-involved.

Regina's romance with Martha leads to the dramatic unraveling of her academic identity. As the union evolves from clandestine midnight encounters to a full-fledged relationship, Regina's scholarly and professional goals suddenly feel unimportant. Where graduate study once made her feel mature or grown up, coursework and papers now seem insignificant. She also feels that her new depth of feeling—her new "experience," that is—separates her from her classmates who pursue only academic learning. When Regina passes the university library shortly after meeting Martha, for example, she feels disconnected from her peers inside "still toiling over their texts" (69). She reflects, "My purpose seemed suddenly, thoroughly different from theirs . . . My reason to be [at school] was clear to no one but myself—and Martha" (69). Eugenides similarly explores this tension between education and experience in *The Marriage Plot*, yet Madeleine's distraction from her academic path was largely unintentional; caring for Leonard during his depressive episodes simply overwhelmed her own goals. Here, Regina's abandonment of her academic career is more deliberate: she decides to leave the PhD program after two semesters. And when she bumps into a former classmate shortly thereafter and listens as he describes his scholarly work, Regina immediately feels a huge gulf between their lives, a fact that makes her only more confident in her decision: "My true self felt so far from this conversation . . . Aesthetic/Prosthetic and Ballard; I'd never care a fig about these things again. Only love mattered to me" (162). Despite her prodigious intellectual ability and many years of academic success, Regina is happy to let her desire for Martha

wholly displace her scholarly goals. While academic learning and personal learning entangle and clash for Madeleine, for Regina, they become utterly incompatible with one another.

Though Martha does reciprocate Regina's powerful feelings, she does not, or cannot, match Regina's deep investment in their relationship. At thirty-three, Martha is twelve years older than Regina, and as a married, tenure-track professor and mother of an infant son, she is also in a stage of life that carries far more obligations. In Regina's response to this discrepancy, we see that besides her love for Martha, the other crucial identity marker for Regina is not race, family background, or sexual orientation, but age itself. Throughout the novel, Choi takes pains to draw attention to Regina's age and how it affects her sense of self and her actions. First, Regina is comparatively younger than her peers; she turns twenty-one just after starting graduate school, an age when most students are college juniors. Even as a child, Regina tried to mask being younger or appearing less mature than her classmates by "studiously assuming [their] manners and mores" (35). Her differences from Martha in age and experience breed in Regina an intense desire to be older, to appear Martha's equal in order to avoid losing her. In this way, Choi turns upside down the bildungsroman's traditional privileging of youthful innocence; Regina instead views her younger age as a personal flaw or strike against her. She refers to her youth as "that hopeless condition that marked me as different" from Martha (10), and she pleads, "God, give me ten years, but right now!" (158). Her desire to be older is so intense that it contributes to her decision to leave graduate school; she is eager to appear "adult" by shaking off the label of "student." In this way, Regina tries to

adopt a queer perspective on age, wanting it to be measured not by her years but by the strength of her feelings.

Still, Regina and Martha's age difference remains a significant factor in their relationship dynamic. Indeed, the worst insult that Martha can hurl at Regina is to call her young. When Martha tells Regina that she had, years earlier, proposed an open marriage to Nicholas, Regina responds critically, "Might as well not have the marriage at all" (94). When Martha then replies, "God, you are young," Regina "winced as if she'd hit [her]" (94). In a similar exchange, after Regina leaves the graduate program, Martha encourages her to use her newfound freedom to travel. Upset by this suggestion, Regina accuses Martha of trying to get rid of her. Martha defends her intentions, exclaiming, "You're twenty-one! Do you know what I'd give to be that age again?" But Regina views her age as a weakness, and so she pleads angrily, "Do you know what I'd give if you'd stop saying that?" (147). Untroubled by Martha's complex family situation or her own abandoned academic goals, Regina instead worries that her younger age is the one real threat to their relationship.

Regina's obsession with minimizing her age difference from Martha is also entangled with her desire to be seen and noticed as Martha's partner. Because her sense of self is utterly wrapped up in the relationship, she yearns for Martha's more decisive commitment, as well as more formal recognition of their partnership from others. Regina reflects on the relative smallness of this latter wish: "Admiration, notoriety, envy—I didn't need any of this, but I wanted acknowledgment. I was so proud that she loved me—did nobody know?" (160). She constantly begs Martha to take her "someplace" she

is going, and she tries to persuade Martha to have lunch with her in the student café, the most public of academic spaces (161). Martha always denies these requests, attempting to keep her academic and personal spheres separate to preserve her academic reputation after splitting from her husband. Her tentativeness causes Regina to lower her own expectations and even foreshorten her view of the future; she is willing to plan her life only one day at a time if that day is spent with Martha. She reflects, "Much of the time my desire was so humble it didn't reach past the next day: if only she'd lavish me with her assurance. She was a generous, ravenous, unrestrained lover, yet this she withheld. If only she'd tell me she never intended to leave" (158). While Regina entered graduate school with an implicitly hopeful, expansive view of her own future, her attachment to Martha shrinks her view of the world, of time, and of what she deserves. Though she feels richly self-actualized with Martha, she is blind to the ways in which she participates in her own diminishment.

Ultimately, and rather ironically, it is Martha's very acquiescence to going public with their relationship that leads to its collapse. That collapse comes less than a year into their relationship, when Martha agrees, at Regina's urging, to bring Regina as her date to a departmental dinner. On the night of the dinner, though, Martha finds herself ultimately unable to carry out this promise. She blows Regina off, first pretending to be running late, then not showing up at all. Finally, that same night, Martha sleeps with Regina's close friend to precipitate the breakup. Unsurprisingly, given Regina's intense investment in and attachment to the relationship, the breakup profoundly affects her sense of self, sense of purpose, and her plans for the future. When Martha tries to talk to Regina about the

rupture the next day, Regina has no words; she feels that the "pilot light for the flame of [her] voice, softly snuffed itself out" (191). The voice that had learned to "bellow" with Martha is immediately muted. In the period that follows, Regina feels a "wretched deathless consciousness"—to go on without Martha is to merely exist (198). She wears her pain on her body, losing so much weight that she resembles a "skeleton" and often stumbling around drunk (195). The breakup so shatters Regina's identity that she describes the experience as a sort of mislaying of self:

> That winter, I misplaced myself. I was not even lost, a condition which still retains something intended. There can be vigor in "lost." I only slid down . . . I slid down like a scrap from some pile on a cart. I slid down, into dusty unregarded margins, and was left behind and forgotten by the flesh part of me, which went on. But the flesh part did little apart from go on. (198)

Regina is so traumatized she feels a separation of body and soul. Grief robs her of her humanity, and so she exists solely in corporeal form, a living corpse. As with Regina's drinking and anorexia, Choi marks the physical effects of Regina's decline: choosing the most passive of verbs of movement, she repeats how Regina "slid down" and down. Choi also chooses non-descript nouns to represent Regina, comparing her to "a scrap from some pile on a cart." Even as an inanimate object, Regina's depression makes her abstract and formless once again.

The significance of this heartbreak is not only its intensity, but also the fact that Regina ultimately moves forward from it. Despite the despair and lifelessness she feels, after a stretch of time, she finds the energy to revive herself. She intuits, "I knew it was

time to leave now"—time to leave the place where she loved Martha so that she might also leave behind her own depressed existence (211). Ironically, Regina finds support in her relationship with Nicholas, her former professor and Martha's estranged husband. In their shared heartbreak over each losing Martha, the two began a peculiar romantic relationship, more therapeutic than passionate. And it is Nicholas who generously encourages Regina on her way forward—packing her car for her to move away and assuring her, when she begins to hesitate, that she is "going to be wonderful" (213).

The novel's extended timeline, which jumps ahead fifteen years from 1992 to 2007, helps us see the many ways Regina does indeed go on to be wonderful, and significantly, to keep on developing well into adulthood. Key to her ongoing growth is a return to the world of books. Just as Madeleine's enrollment in graduate school catalyzed her progress at the end of *The Marriage Plot*, for Regina, getting a job at a publishing house restarts her professional growth. Even her sudden firing from this job (for being "an incorrigible snob") is professionally fruitful—she writes an intentionally lowbrow novel as an act of "revenge," and it becomes a bestseller (216). Regina's very desire to write something for "revenge" is meaningful, as it represents an impassioned revival of the literary interest she had abandoned entirely when with Martha. And this renewed interest is sustained into the present day of the novel: the Regina of 2007 is at work on her third book. Thus, for both Eugenides and Choi, the most powerful way that Madeleine and Regina can begin to resuscitate themselves after traumatic romantic losses is by reclaiming their intellectual interests. Both women reorient themselves to the future

by returning to what had inspired them in the past, before they met their partners: literature and learning.

In the latter part of the novel, set in 2007, Regina is thirty-six, married to a supportive, pragmatic man, and pregnant with her second child. Some critics have found this unusual narrative time jump ineffective or contrived. Ron Charles concedes that the section "does offer some wisdom" on Regina's evolving view of love, but he overall finds the novel's final third "distractingly poor." Wolitzer has a more favorable response to this last section, though she admits to being initially "resistant" to this narrative leap because she "never want[s] characters to get older, to leave behind the excitement and excesses of youth." But as Choi shows us, leaving behind the excitement and excesses of youth is a crucial part of Regina's coming of age.

While professional success came quickly for Regina, she feels that her personal growth had stagnated long after her breakup with Martha; she admits that for years she had carried a "stubbornly obstructive and . . . shameful bereavement for Martha" (266). Regina points to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as finally catalyzing her personal growth,[36] and in an obvious nod to one of the most classic tales of female coming of age, *Jane Eyre*, Regina explains, "Reader, I grew up" (266). By "growing up," Regina means that she acquiesces to and actually begins to desire a more traditional trajectory of adulthood: she agrees to marry her longtime boyfriend, and she has a child. In order to move forward in

[36] Choi joins a number of contemporary bildungsroman authors who explicitly explore how recent historic events influence the personal development of their protagonists. Lorrie Moore also incorporates the 9/11 attacks in her novel *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), as does Patricia Park in *Re Jane* (2015), a novel featured in Chapter Two. Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013) contains a similar, though fictional, New York City terrorist attack. Chapter Two's *Americanah* (2013) features the historic 2008 election of President Barack Obama, and Chapter Three's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) takes place during Hurricane Katrina.

this way, amidst her enduring feelings for Martha, Regina has to allow the very notion of Martha to be "leached of reality" for her (250). In turn, she is surprised to find many aspects of marriage and motherhood personally fulfilling.

Still, when Martha unexpectedly pops back into Regina's life a decade-and-a-half later, Regina cannot ignore how powerfully she reanimates in her mind. Further revising the traditional notion that marriage and parenthood mark one's "complete" maturation, Regina finds that marrying and having a child do not secure her designation as "grown up"—especially when it comes to Martha. Reflecting the novel's contemporary timeframe, the women reconnect via the internet: Regina discovers that Martha's teenage son has a blog, and in reading his words, Regina finds even Martha's abstract, virtual presence to be all-consuming. Indeed, she reads the blog compulsively and starts drafting emails to Martha in her head.

In some ways, Regina's obsessive daydreams echo the rich and sometimes painful inner life of Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa, like Regina, married a good man who loves and respects her and who grants her a large degree of personal freedom. Yet Clarissa finds that even the slightest sight or sound can launch her back into her past, causing her to relive and re-*feel* moments of bliss and painful regret. She especially struggles to feel at peace with her decision not to marry Peter Walsh, so that decades later, Clarissa "would still find herself arguing [with herself] in St. James's Park, still making out that she had been right—and she had too—not to marry him" (8). While Clarissa repeatedly reminds herself that she had made the right decision in not marrying Peter, the act of repeating the debate reveals that she remains somewhat unsettled with the decision. In further evidence

of this, when Clarissa sees Peter for the first time in many years, she is struck by how comfortable they are together: "Now of course, thought Clarissa, he's enchanting! perfectly enchanting! Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind—and why did I make up my mind—not to marry him?" (41).[37] With Peter physically in front of her, Clarissa progresses quickly from replaying their breakup scene, to empathizing with her past self over the difficulty of that decision, to feeling actual, explicit regret and self-blame as she asks herself incredulously, "and why did I make up make up mind—not to marry him?"

Like Clarissa, Regina finds that reopening the window to the past has tangible effects in the present. Her renewed contact with Martha significantly affects her day-to-day, "real, full New York life" (255). She becomes so pulled into this inner world and distracted from her daily life that her husband accuses her of completely ignoring him and their young son. But unlike Clarissa Dalloway, Regina does not attempt to contain her longing for Martha in her mind. Clarissa finds herself at one point wanting to say to Peter, "Take me with you," but she does not actually say the words (47). Regina, however, takes concrete action to revisit the past: she emails Martha's son, buys a plane

[37] In another seeming allusion to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Regina reflects, "In the course of married life, the perilous transition I most often endured was the preliminary moment of hosting a dinner. The blundering scrum at the door; the salutation of Matthew, immured and in fact downright stony amid pots and pans in the kitchen; the dispatching of jackets and bags; the exclaiming in grateful protest over stuffed toys for Lion and bottles of wine; and all the while the secret, panicky struggle to surmount the great hurdle and serve a first round. At that point, the page turned" (228). In Regina's description of the stress of hosting, it is hard not to recall Clarissa's worry that her own party would be a flop: "Oh dear, it was going to be a failure; a complete failure, Clarissa felt it in her bones . . . Why, after all, did she do these things?" (167). Yet Clarissa, too, can pinpoint just the moment when her party becomes successful, and reflects, relieved: "So it wasn't a failure after all! It was going to be all right now—her party. It had begun. It had started" (170).

ticket, rents a car, and goes to visit Martha on the other side of the country. And for the day and night that she and Martha spend together, they resume their relationship as lovers. *Writing beyond the ending,* Choi, like Eugenides, presents marriage not as a rigid developmental or narrative endpoint, but as a still-mutable, flexible, and even reversible turn in life.

This brief rekindling of Regina and Martha's affair recalls the relationship's very genesis fifteen years earlier: again, Regina does not seem to consider how a husband and child might be affected—only this time, they are her own. Significantly, however, Regina demonstrates a new degree of empowered agency with Martha: she takes action to leave earlier than planned to go back to her family in New York. Fifteen years before, such a departure would have been unthinkable for Regina, who was willing to give up everything to be with Martha, including her academic career and her expansive view of the future. Even after Martha so deeply betrayed her, Regina admitted, "I still loved her: I could have stopped my own heart with my mind if it meant she'd come back" (194). Significantly, when Martha dramatically ended their relationship back then, Regina was not an active participant. And relatedly, it was the trauma of 9/11 that spurred Regina to marry a decade later—she again was not the main agent in this decision. But during this second chance with Martha, Regina is finally able to realize her dream of being Martha's peer, and this empowers her to become the driver of decisions and change. She recalls, "I had used to dream, when I'd loved her from such desperate disadvantage, of one day catching up, being not the naïve, needy girl she'd too fully ensnared but a woman, like her, with my own gravity" (293). And when she sees Martha all these years later, she

finally feels that she brings this gravity, and this feeling proves therapeutic: "I'd caught up. . . . we were equal" (293). By seizing the chance to briefly revisit the romance as Martha's equal, Regina finally has opportunity to leave the relationship on her own terms; only then can she move beyond the relationship more fully. *Resisting* a relationship is thus as important for Regina as avowing one, just as it was for Eugenides's Madeleine. So many years and experiences later, Regina can do more than bear the loss of Martha; she can find a way to accept and even embrace that loss by actively participating in it. This true release of the past—rather than just an avoidance of the past—proves therapeutic and generative for Regina.

When Regina leaves Martha, she removes herself from the affair not only physically, but also mentally. To prevent the temptation of future romantic reconciliation with Martha, who is long-divorced, she tries to find Martha a partner. Playing matchmaker, Regina sets up Martha with an old graduate school friend, the man Martha had slept with to leave Regina. Regina had reconciled with this friend long ago but had only recently learned that he continued to love Martha in secret for all this time. Regina's desire for this couple to find happiness with each other, even after their union years before was so devastating to her, is a demonstration of her own healing; it shows her desire to look ahead, not behind. Choi ends the novel just as this matchmaking comes to fruition: Regina peers in through a restaurant window as her graduate school friend, Martha, and Martha's son meet for the dinner Regina had arranged. Observing them, she "lingered a moment to watch their glad faces" (296). While Regina was supposed to join them for this dinner, she instead appreciates the reunion from a distance. This action

parallels the new sense of remove she can feel from her past with Martha—a remove that will, in turn, carve out new space for her future.

This open ending, while tinged with sadness and loss, is also decidedly hopeful. Regina is returning home to her growing family, her literary pursuits, and her tomorrow with a new sense of peace with herself and her past. No longer tethered to her romantic history, no longer wondering what might have been with Martha, she can use her gained knowledge and experience to move forward in new ways to keep developing and experiencing. While Regina had once felt her life could have no purpose without Martha as her partner, her view of the future and her place within it is once again open and vast. At this point of maturity and agency in her mid-thirties, Regina is able to reflect, "Now I saw all my selves, *even those that did not yet exist*" (281, emphasis added). With these words, Choi emphasizes that Regina's development of her various identities is ever unfolding.

Education and Experience: Higher Ed, Deeper Romance, Longer Paths

Both *The Marriage Plot* and *My Education* depict the coming-of-age journeys of bright, inquisitive, highly educated women. Benefitting from the vastly expanded opportunities for women in a post-second-wave feminist era, Madeleine and Regina view their academic and professional paths as wide open, and they have a far richer set of personal options than most of their female literary predecessors. As *weiterbildungsroman* protagonists, both women are in their early twenties at the beginning of their narratives, legal adults who are still very much exploring what it means to be grown up. In this way,

Eugenides and Choi stretch the developmental timetable, moving away from the bildungsroman's traditional focus on youth. The authors also update the way that education serves contemporary bildung, shifting the focus from the primary or secondary school setting into the college and graduate classroom.

Through the relationships developed in these academic settings, the authors also emphasize that love, and love's ruptures, are sites of education and development as much as the classroom. Given the hard-fought victories of the 1960s and 1970s that dramatically changed the social, educational, and professional landscape for women, it may seem surprising—if not utterly regressive—that for Madeleine and Regina, two women pursuing advanced education, the most powerful source of knowledge is not a course or text but instead, a single romantic relationship. Indeed, as romance and education collide for these intelligent, bookish protagonists, their relationships at times come to dramatically trump their scholarly pursuits.

But this is not, I argue, necessarily "un-feminist" or a signal of decline; rather, this intersection of education and romance reflects the changed conception of the identity formation process, and its timeline and sites. Both Eugenides and Choi explore how one's sense of self and sense of the world can change as we tie and untie ourselves to other people, and both see turbulent love and loss as personally formative. The edifying nature of intense romance is further emphasized by the historical fictional nature of these novels; both authors set the novels around the same time that they themselves were students. Looking back at that life stage from a distance, both authors seem to offer insights about the intensity of early adult love. They show that the passion and the

inevitable collapse of this kind of relationship is a rite of passage and a means to self-knowledge.

And while DuPlessis observes that romance and personal quest are traditionally at odds with one another, Choi and Eugenides *write beyond the ending* to show that for women today, romantic relationships can be productively formative in one's development. This shift is in part because romantic relationships are no longer expected to end in marriage. In their relationships, both Madeleine and Regina feel activated and self-actualized. Both women learn about their sexuality and desires: Regina feels sex with Martha opens up new dimensions of her identity, and Madeleine learns how much intense physical connection matters to her (she reflects that she had previously felt "turned off by physical stuff" with other partners) (59). Madeleine's relationship even helps her develop a wider, more empathetic perspective towards other people. In his early descriptions of his protagonist, Eugenides emphasizes the rigid, privileged view of the world that Madeleine held before meeting Leonard: she "had never been close to anyone with a verifiable mental illness. She instinctively avoided unstable people. As uncharitable as this attitude was, it was part and parcel of being a Hanna, of being a positive, privileged, sheltered, exemplary person" (122). This earlier attitude not only serves to emphasize the intensity and unlikelihood of Madeleine's attraction toward Leonard, it also becomes a baseline marker for her own growing empathy and understanding.

Though Eugenides and Choi show that romance can offer positive personal insight, these relationships offer harder lessons as well. At times, these romances threaten to dramatically diminish Madeleine's and Regina's sense of agency and stifle their

ambition. Eugenides and Choi make clear that this, too, is part of their education, and the authors also offer a warning about the risky, identity-stifling nature of all-consuming romantic relationships. A self-abnegating love, they show, is dangerous. The authors also suggest that this kind of intense relationship is a rite of passage *specific* to this particular stage in life, the college years and twenties. Choi reflects that she wanted to capture the kind of love possible during this time, when one thinks, "We love each other. . . . why should we have to think about anything else?" But she also wanted to capture how the ability to love in this way expires with time, and so she also includes in her narrative Regina at age thirty-six: "her older self looking back and kind of marveling that she could ever feel that way" (Neary).

Tellingly, by the end of each novel, neither Madeleine nor Regina remains in the transformative romantic relationship begun at school. Further, in Eugenides's and Choi's conceptualization, marriage, a traditional endpoint of the bildungsroman, is not an endpoint at all. In these novels, marriage serves as neither a happy ending nor as a condition that relegates a protagonist to a life of static unhappiness. Likewise, an impending annulment or divorce will not dictate Madeleine's options and life path.

Indeed, as Eugenides and Choi make clear in these *weiterbildungsromane*, the coming-of-age path does not end at eighteen, or at twenty-two, or in marriage, motherhood, divorce, or an affair. While higher education and early adult romances offer a fertile site for personal exploration, there remains, importantly, room for continued change and development beyond them. Both women are ultimately able to pick themselves up and forge ahead after losses. Literature and writing proves important in

these personal revivals, as does an implicit conception of their development as not fixed but ongoing. Viewed this way, the experiences Madeleine and Regina have in these higher education settings can profoundly *shape* their lives without necessarily *determining* their lives. Madeleine does not worry, for instance, that she will remain alone just because she ends a marriage before she has turned twenty-four (and in fact, she rejects Mitchell as her suitor), nor does Regina give up on love after she is devastated by Martha (instead, she has a number of relationships and then marries and has children, much to her own surprise). Thus, as these women negotiate the tension and often the clash between education and experience, they benefit from feeling that they have both more room and more time to explore and grow, succeed and fail, love and mourn. Eugenides's and Choi's novels suggest that the real aim of contemporary female bildung is independence, the confidence to make decisions. The steps that both Madeleine and Regina take after loss to continue to learn, explore, and reach for a place in the world that sustains them show their development as continuous, rather than being limited to a fixed period in youth or early adulthood.

Chapter 2: The New Americans—
Immigration & Identity in *Americanah* and *Re Jane*

In a 1996 article, Indian-born scholar and novelist Bharati Mukherjee emphasizes the mutual influence between an immigrant and her adopted country. She explains that her work seeks to honor the way America has changed her, but also to "show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America." She concludes, "The end result of immigration . . . is this two-way transformation" (34). This kind of mutual transformation is the theme of the present chapter. How does the United States' international diversity shape its stories of bildung, and how do immigrants enrich its national narratives? What gets lost in translation in a new place, language, and culture, and what opportunities exist for personal invention and reinvention? How does identity change based on where a protagonist stands in the world? What if "home" is made up of multiple places?

The bildungsroman genre frequently uses movement, mobility, and migration to represent or spur a protagonist's inner development. Traditionally, this has included movement from the childhood home out into the world, movement from the country to the city, and more intangibly, movement from childhood hopes to adult compromises and from the lower class to the upper class. Increasingly, authors of American bildungsromane use the trope of immigration to explore these various personal migrations. As this country grows ever more diverse, authors of US coming-of-age stories find new ways of exploring that diversity, and in recent female bildungsromane,

the traditional theme of mobility is explored through international immigration that is specifically *multi-directional*. This reflects the fact that for women today, an "American" identity may be a hybrid identity with ties to multiple places.

In this chapter, I explore the ongoing relationship between place, movement, and identity in two texts with immigrant protagonists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Patricia Park's *Re Jane* (2015). In both novels, immigration to the US is depicted as not a *single* arrival but as a *series* of arrivals and departures—a depiction that emphasizes the continuing development of early adulthood shown in the last chapter. Through careful close readings, I show that these protagonists' journeys of development are definitively shaped by the condition of immigration—particularly as each experiences racial or ethnic othering. I argue that through engagement with and renegotiation of the genres of bildungsroman and immigrant narrative, both *Americanah* and *Re Jane* update the concept of mobility to depict the process of identity formation as an open-ended, multidirectional journey across geographic space. Each protagonist's identity changes as her geography changes, and this personal and geographic mutability ultimately allows her to see her development as ongoing. Significantly, this outlook widens each protagonist's perspective on herself, her potential, and the flexible nature of her journey through the world. I demonstrate that this empowered perspective gets reflected in the novels' optimistic, forward-looking endings.

Because the US is a nation of immigrants, its coming-of-age literature is distinctively international and polyglot. The American bildungsroman has long been infused with the immigration experience and closely related to the broader immigrant

narrative. Sometimes called "immigrant bildungsromane" or "ethnic bildungsromane,"[38] these hybrid texts draw on features from both genres to show how immigrant status compounds the challenges of identity formation. Early narratives of immigrant bildung include Drude Krog Janson's *A Saloon Keeper's Daughter*—published in 1887, just three years after one of the best-known American bildungsromane, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—and Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918). Other texts in this early literary period focused on a different, much darker kind of immigration in the US: forced displacement. In *Our Nig: or, Sketches From the Life of a Free Black* (1859), the first novel published by an African American woman, Harriet E. Wilson tells the story of a mixed race young girl who is adopted by a white family but then forced to be its servant. In the autobiographical stories "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" and "The School Days of an Indian Girl" (1900), Zitkala-Sa describes the trauma of being taken from her reservation and brutally forced to assimilate at a white Quaker boarding school.

Trends in American coming-of-age literature have mirrored changes in US immigration patterns, resulting in an explosion of contemporary bildungsromane with immigrant protagonists. In the early twentieth century, immigrant coming-of-age narratives mostly featured European subjects, like the Eastern European Jewish protagonists in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934). As the nation's population diversified in the second half of the

[38] Others, though, find such labels limiting. Jhumpa Lahiri, for example, bristles at the term "immigrant fiction": "If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction? This distinction doesn't agree with me" ("Jhumpa Lahiri"). Bolaki and Feng, however, use the term "ethnic bildungsroman" to draw attention to the historically overlooked experiences of minority coming of age. When possible, I attempt to use more descriptive phrases like "literature of immigrant bildung" in this chapter.

twentieth century, so too did its coming-of-age stories. Changes in discriminatory federal policies opened up the US borders to groups from all corners of the globe.[39] This enabled bildungsromane about West Indian immigrants, notably Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). The late 1980s and 1990s saw a wave of Asian American fiction, including popular bildungsromane like Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). And in the early twenty-first century, African voices have increased in US coming-of-age fiction, including NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) and Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names* (2014).[40] The bildungsromane in this chapter reflect these latter two trends: *Re Jane* follows the development of Korean-born Jane, and *Americanah* traces the bildung of Nigerian Ifemelu.

Adichie and Park draw on features from both the bildungsroman and the immigrant narrative. Like typical immigrant narratives, both texts feature an international journey and demonstrate the difficulties of the immigrant experience—a distinct pain Madelaine Hron calls "immigrant suffering" (xiv). Similarly, the authors engage deliberately with the bildungsroman genre. Park's *Re Jane* is a contemporary retelling of the classic story of female coming of age, *Jane Eyre*, while Adichie has described

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[39] Particularly important was the 1943 repeal of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which finally ended the quota system.

[40] For more on this trend in fiction, see Felicia R. Lee's 2014 article, "New Wave of African Writers with an Internationalist Bent." Lee writes, "Black literary writers with African roots . . . are making a splash in the book world, especially in the United States. They are on best-seller lists, garner high profile reviews and win major awards, in America and in Britain."

Americanah as being "about a woman who comes into her own" (Jones). In both texts, bildung is reimagined as a physical–spiritual journey. In this return to the archetypal quests of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *Jane Eyre*, and other early models of the form, Adichie and Park both use geographical movement to spur and stymie identity formation.[41]

While Adichie and Park rely on some of the traditional generic conventions of the bildungsroman and immigrant narrative to capture the experiences of their contemporary female protagonists, they also revise these conventions. In this chapter, I point out changes in the protagonists' age, geographic trajectories, and experiences as immigrant/other. What emerges from the texts is a sense of the process of identity formation (and mutation) as open-ended and ongoing. For instance, like the novels discussed in Chapter One, *Americanah* and *Re Jane* are *weiterbildungsromane*, texts that focus on the development of an older protagonist. Park's Jane is in her early twenties, and for most of the narrative, Ifemelu is between nineteen and thirty-two. As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, this represents a revision of the bildungsroman's traditional focus on subjects in youth.

And in a meaningful revision of the immigrant narrative, Ifemelu's and Jane's journeys are multiple and multidirectional. Traditionally, immigrant narratives depict a one-way journey from an "unlivable" homeland and a single process of assimilation, as in Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) (Cowart 7). But

[41] In addition to the texts under study in this chapter, this link between immigration, movement, place, and identity is also richly explored in other recent bildungsromane like Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008).

immigration in *Americanah* and *Re Jane* is not a one-way, final geographic move; significantly, both young women choose to return to their birth countries, at least temporarily.[42] The women's adult ages and the circumstances of their immigration afford them a new geographic flexibility: because their homelands are not "unlivable," they can elect to go back to them. Jane moves to Korea for a year shortly after graduating from college; then, unfulfilled there, she returns to the US. In *Americanah,* Ifemelu spends thirteen years in the US before electing to return to Nigeria, and at the novel's close, she is re-acclimating to life there.[43] In this chapter, I follow Ifemelu's and Jane's geographic movements, tracing how their identities develop, evolve, shift, and even radically change based on where they are in the world. As I show, even though geographical movement often has a global dimension for these protagonists, their journeys need not be transatlantic to be transformative. Jane's cross-borough move from Queens to Brooklyn gives rise to nearly as many cultural misunderstandings as her move from Brooklyn to Seoul, and Ifemelu's brief train ride from the Princeton campus to working-class Trenton sparks some of the same questions of identity that she faces when she eventually returns to Lagos. Inspired by Carole Boyce Davies's conception of a "politics of location," I employ a purposefully loose definition of "journey" to recognize any important movement through space (153).

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[42] This reflects recent trends in the US, too. Between 2009 and 2014, more Mexican immigrants left the United States than entered the country; the majority of those returning to Mexico did so to reunite with family (Jordan). In 2015, *The New York Times* reported a trend of immigrants returning to their native countries for retirement (Tugend).

[43] The complicated experience of returning to one's homeland is also explored in other contemporary bildungsromane, including Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009).

Throughout these multidirectional journeys, both women encounter moments of othering. These texts confirm what earlier narratives already reveal: moving to the United States is not an immediate panacea for the protagonists' problems, and life in the US indeed introduces new struggles that make them feel like outsiders. In this chapter, I examine the far-reaching ways that being an immigrant and being seen as different—especially racially or ethnically different—affects each woman's life and identity. I concentrate my analysis on four often-intersecting issues: each woman's language and voice; sexuality and romantic relationships; work experiences, especially the job of au pair; and finally, physical appearance, a focus that particularly emphasizes the femaleness of these experiences.

These are typical sites of identity formation in stories of immigrant bildung, yet Adichie and Park update them to capture some of the subtler ways that outsider status affects personal development in the US today—a time of both increasing diversity, and, in a post 9/11 world, renewed hostility toward immigrants. For example, the protagonists' immigration experiences are marked less by language barriers than by subtler linguistic negotiations. Immigrant coming-of-age novels have long highlighted the difficulties of learning English and communicating in a new place, as in Roth's *Call It Sleep*, when young Yiddish-speaking David gets lost on the Lower East Side and struggles to be understood as he asks for directions home. He is searching for Barhdee Street, which he pronounces "Boddeh Stritt"; misunderstood, he gets sent to Potter Street (98-101).[44] By

[44] The challenge of English language acquisition for new immigrants in the US is recently depicted in Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* (2010) and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). Kwok's Kim finds that the vocabulary she learned in basic English classes in Hong Kong "did not in any way resemble what I now

contrast, Ifemelu arrives in the US fluent in English, and Jane grows up a native speaker. Yet both authors still pay attention to linguistic positioning, focusing on accent, voice, and slang in a second language, as when Ifemelu laboriously masks her Nigerian accent with an American one after experiencing discrimination in the US. With these softened examples of "othering," Adichie and Park show that the challenges of coming of age are still compounded for their immigrant heroines, despite their relative privilege.

In this chapter, I show that these generic revisions—older protagonists, multidirectional movement through space (and a return home), and even new experiences of othering—generate a conception of development as ongoing. This view ultimately contributes to the open-ended, hopeful endings of these novels. Ifemelu's and Jane's physical-spiritual quests do not end in marriage and parenthood, as they do in older bildungsromane like *Wilhelm Meister*, *David Copperfield*, and *Jane Eyre*. Instead, these contemporary protagonists use their experiences to develop independence and individual agency, a personal growth that unfolds indefinitely as they navigate life's developments and setbacks, opportunities and obstacles. In fact, these journeying women seem to resist any traditional drive to closure: they end romantic relationships, they date married men, they move and change jobs. This lack of closure is especially conspicuous in *Re Jane*, as

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heard in Brooklyn" (27). Kwok visually illustrates Kim's confusion and shows us how she processes and tries to translate the words that she hears; when a teacher announces a pop geography quiz, Kim hears: "This is a pop *quick*. Fill in *allde captal see T's*" (26). Unsure about what she is supposed to do, she looks around, which causes the teacher to say, "No *cheap pen!* You a *hero"* (27). Baffled, Kim receives a zero for "cheating." Later, she prays to her late father, "*Please help me perfect my English so I can take care of us*" (84, all emphases in original). In *We Need New Names,* Darling googles American phrases to try to follow along with her peers' conversations. Classmates tease her about "the way I talked or said things" to the point that "I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, *in my language*, in my head, everything" (167, emphasis added).

Park's Jane does not settle down with her Rochester but instead decides to leave him. Taken together, and considered alongside other contemporary bildungsromane with immigrant protagonists, these novels broaden traditional representations of both the immigrant coming-of-age experience and the American coming-of-age experience, and in turn, expand our conceptions of Americanness and identity formation.

Americanah—From African to Black to Americanah

In *Americanah* (2013), Ifemelu comes to the United States from Nigeria at age nineteen with a student visa, a university scholarship, and a strong sense of who she is. In contrast with the traditional immigrant narrative, Ifemelu does not "escape" to America; her reason for leaving her middle-class community in Nigeria is pragmatic: she wants to continue her university studies in the United States after faculty strikes disrupt her education. Adichie's departure from the well-known narrative is deliberate. In an interview with *The New Yorker* in 2013, she describes *Americanah* as a different a kind of immigration tale: while "the generally known immigration story, especially for the African immigrant, is that of leaving war or poverty," she explains, her novel "is about another kind of immigration, of people who do not come from burned villages, but are seeking that sublime thing: choice" (Davidson). Yogita Goyal argues that Adichie's novel in fact serves as a "rebuke to the unworldliness" of post-9/11 American fiction (xii). In *Americanah,* Adichie makes clear that the "American story" is, in fact, a global one.

Over the course of thirteen years in the US, Ifemelu has a striking range of experiences—poverty and affluence, romance and heartbreak, discrimination and

celebrity, fulfillment and deep depression. She becomes a nanny, finishes college, dates a wealthy man, dates a professor, becomes a famed blogger about US race relations, and gets a fellowship at Princeton. Still, she feels unfulfilled, and so she returns to Lagos and restarts her romance with Obinze, her now-married boyfriend from high school. Over the years, Ifemelu's experiences shape and reshape her identity—from unemployed immigrant to "the help" to renowned race expert—and they show us how development is shaped by movement, space, and context. In many of these situations, Ifemelu's dark skin and status as an immigrant dramatically affect how she is viewed by others, and this in turn affects how she views herself.

The novel is complexly structured and sweeping in scope, and its formal innovations draw attention to the variety of voices that make up Ifemelu's identity. While *Americanah* is written in the third person, the narrator intimately follows Ifemelu's feelings and evolving personal understanding. We also get access to Ifemelu's first-person written voice through the blog posts and email exchanges with Obinze included in the narrative. The novel spans more than twenty years and covers extensive personal and geographic terrain: the narrative moves back and forth between Ifemelu's present day in New Jersey; her childhood and schooling in Nigeria; and across thirteen years of experiences in the United States (in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Princeton, and Trenton). The narrative eventually follows Ifemelu as she returns to Lagos at age thirty-two. Ifemelu's multidirectional movement reflects a decentering of the US in immigration stories; the United States is considered *an* option for success and adult fulfillment, but it is not *the only* option. Her journey is intercut with sections that focus on

her aunt and on Obinze, including a 57-page section about Obinze's early adult struggles as an immigrant in London that serves as a bildungsroman-within-a-bildungsroman. Taken together, the third-person narration, poly-focal narration, multi-destination quest, and wide timeframe gives this hyper-contemporary novel—full of Facebook searches, text messages, and the 2008 election of Barack Obama—an old-fashioned, epic quality that resembles *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch.* Adichie has shared in interviews her passion for George Eliot and "old Russian novels," so it is perhaps unsurprising that she chose to divide her 477-page story into seven parts and 54 chapters (Barber). Because of my interest in the ways that Ifemelu's immigration to the US and her return to Nigeria inform her identity formation, the analysis that follows concentrates primarily on those sections of the novel, when she is between age nineteen and thirty-two.

However, it is important to keep Ifemelu's early adolescent and teenage experiences in Nigeria in sight to appreciate how quickly and dramatically she is affected by her move to the United States. She arrives in the US with a well defined personal identity, having already had a number of traditional coming-of-age experiences: she has lost her virginity and found empowerment in her sexuality, fallen in love, moved hours away from home to attend college, been recognized for her intellect, and feels, in some ways, that she has moved beyond her "provincial" parents. Ifemelu has a strong-willed boldness that has long charmed her friends and gotten her into trouble with adults. Her father rebukes her as a child for her "natural proclivity towards provocation" (52), and as a teen, she delights to hear a classmate describe her as "too much trouble" because "She

can argue. She can talk. She never agrees" (60). At nineteen, Ifemelu has a strong voice and clear sense of self-worth.

Yet in the United States, Ifemelu's bold confidence diminishes almost immediately, and her experiences as an immigrant begin to undo the sense of self she cultivated in Nigeria. Because Ifemelu is in some ways better equipped than many to adapt to life in a new country—she comes legally, knows the language, and has an aunt and childhood friend nearby—her experiences highlight the enduring challenges of being an immigrant, no matter how advantaged. Ifemelu feels like a cultural outsider, unable to comprehend daily conversations and situations. Constant "puzzlements" disorient her and create a "sensation of fogginess, of a milky web through which she tried to claw" (132). She wonders how people know "when to laugh" and "what to laugh about" (126). Being an immigrant in a foreign land unsettles Ifemelu's identity, her view of her future, and even her wellbeing.

Over time, these ongoing cultural confusions diminish Ifemelu's confidence, outgoing personality, and sense of agency. She feels "invisible"—a far cry from being known as loud and argumentative back in Nigeria (154). While moving to the US was supposed to open up choices, Ifemelu instead feels disempowered, as if she was "standing at the periphery of her own life" (133). Feeling disconnected proves not only uncomfortable for Ifemelu but dangerous:

> [S]he was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her. It terrified her, to be unable to visualize tomorrow. When her parents called and left a voice message, she saved

> it, unsure if that would be the last time she would hear their voices. To be here, living abroad, not knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety. (154)

Ifemelu feels so attacked and threatened by life in the US that she feels it could kill not just her spirit but her body. Adichie emphasizes that Ifemelu leaves Nigeria not because of war, but for "choice," and yet, Ifemelu ends up in her own state of war in the United States. To simply face each day in a foreign country is to be like a soldier on the battlefield, marching directly towards the enemy and probable death. This "war" threatens to destroy even the good things in her life—family, love, and attachments. As critic Eugenia Williamson observes, Adichie's novel "is superlative at making clear just how isolating it can be to live far away from home."

Indeed, Ifemelu's early experiences in the US are a series of increasingly painful traumas—traumas spurred, in part, by living as a foreigner in an unfamiliar place, but also by being a black woman in a country with a long history of racism and ethnic discrimination. The traditional Goethean conception of coming of age—where, after a journey in search of self-knowledge, a young man matures and joins society—implicitly excludes minority subjects, whom society has denigrated throughout history. Nada Halloway observes that "the European version [of the bildungsroman] does not deal with race" (153).[45] But race and the effects of institutional racism are regularly explored in the American bildungsroman, including in canonical texts like *The Autobiography of an Ex-*

[45] While this is true historically, there is now a rich body of European bildungsromane that feature minority protagonists, from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) to Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012).

Colored Man (1912), *Black Boy* (1945), *Invisible Man* (1952), *Maud Martha* (1953), and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Narrative subjects have continued to diversify over time, and today's US bildungsromane commonly—and perhaps more commonly than not—feature ethnic subjects. They include recent literary prize award-winning texts like Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012), as well as three of the novels under study in this project: *Americanah*, *Re Jane*, and Chapter Three's *Salvage the Bones*.

Just as feminist critics in the 1970s and 80s began exploring the complex and historically overlooked bildung of female protagonists, since the 1990s, there has been a wave of sustained attention to the bildungsromane of racial and ethnic minorities. These texts have ties to a longer literary history that includes US slave narratives and immigration stories. By emphasizing individual experience and personhood, these genres acquire social power: slave narratives, of course, were highly important in the abolitionist movement, and many early immigrant novelists "wrote back" against the negative ethnic stereotypes they were assigned (Barrish 175). Martin Japtok argues that the bildungsroman is especially empowering for ethnic subjects because it becomes "an assertion of individuality . . . in the face of a denial of individuality, or even of humanity, because of one's group affiliation" (24). As I examine in the following sections, Ifemelu is indeed denied this individuality when she arrives in the US. She is received by the country as a black immigrant woman with an accent—not as a bright student; not as an outspoken, opinionated thinker; and not even as someone's daughter, lover, or friend. The

"horde of faceless people who were all against her" deny her any personal nuance. In the face of such exclusion, Ifemelu's story, as Japtok says, takes on a deep urgency.

Despite this attention to ethnic bildung, scholars have been divided on how to classify coming-of-age novels with minority subjects. Some draw generic boundary lines: Gunilla Theander Kester, for instance, argues that the African American bildungsroman, which she calls the "African American narrative of *Bildung*," should be viewed as a genre distinct from the European bildungsroman, and further, that the African American female narrative of *Bildung* should also be viewed as a separate form. Greta LeSeur similarly considers the "black bildungsroman" a distinct genre that may share "characteristics of the European or White bildungsroman" but "cannot be grouped with any of these novels" because of its particular "content and presentation" (21). While I appreciate LeSeur's attention to the different "sociological and historical contexts" that influence bildung, I find that her rigid generic divisions actually diminish contextual nuance (21).

My analytical approach aligns more closely with scholars like Stella Bolaki, Pin-chia Feng, and Japtok, who use more open-ended comparative lenses. Bolaki and Feng find fruitful commonalities of experience in the bildung of women of color and use broader generic categories like "ethnic American novels of development" or "ethnic bildungsromane." Feng loosely defines the ethnic bildungsroman as "any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman," and explains that she intentionally employs this "inclusive strategy" in order to "observe a wide spectrum of the difficult *Bildung* of ethnic women, each case with its own cultural and historical

specificities" (15). Japtok makes cross-ethnic comparisons, and his 2005 work *Growing Up Ethnic* traces the literary similarities between the bildungsromane of African American and Jewish American subjects. Indebted to this work, I explore various iterations of the "immigrant experience" in the US, considering the experiences of a West African immigrant who comes to the US as an adult alongside those of a Korean immigrant who comes in infancy. In doing so, I seek not to erase the important distinctions between these narratives, but to participate in a conversation that focuses on their commonalities in order to appreciate how experiences of immigration and alterity can shape identity formation.

Carole Boyce Davies's work on black women's writing particularly guides my thinking about the relationship between race, movement, and identity in this chapter. Her description of a multilayered "politics of location" in her 1994 text, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, is especially useful here:

> The politics of location brings forward a whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement; location, dis-location; memberment, dis-memberment; citizenship, alienness; boundaries, barriers, transportations; peripheries, cores and centers. It is about positionality in geographic, historical, social, economic, educational terms. It is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. (153)

Davies's conception of location—the numerous abstract and literal border negotiations that affect subjectivity—helps us understand the many ways that Ifemelu's blackness shapes her experiences in the United States. The racism she encounters is a surprise to

her, and she has to be trained by painful experiences to recognize and understand it. Ifemelu is largely unfamiliar with the historical underpinnings of race and racism in the US; in fact, she had never before been considered "black" until she arrived in the US. She explains, "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (292-3). As Davies explains, "blackness" is a constructed label that "only has meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed" (7). Adichie has revealed that she experienced this imposed blackness when she came to the US, and she recalls that it took very little time to learn "that to be 'black' was not a good thing in America" (Bady). Ifemelu similarly picks up on the significance of this marking quickly, and she turns to James Baldwin novels for cultural understanding of the complex ways that "race matters" in the US (293).

Indeed, Ifemelu's foreignness and blackness—two characteristics she did not have in Nigeria—become central to how others view and receive her, and they in turn influence how she views and presents herself. When she tries to register for college classes, the Registrar's office employee assumes that Ifemelu must struggle with English, despite her fluent introduction (she begins, "Good afternoon. Is this the right place for a registration?") (134). The woman does not see Ifemelu as a talented new student who won an academic scholarship; instead, she hears only Ifemelu's foreign accent. She responds in an exaggeratedly slow staccato that Adichie emphasizes with full-stops: "Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?" (134). It takes Ifemelu a moment to understand the situation; amusingly, she initially assumes the woman's slow speech must

be caused by an illness. But when Ifemelu clarifies, "I speak English," the office employee condescends, "I bet you do. I just don't know how well" (134).

Adichie captures the range of Ifemelu's feelings in this moment, from incredulous ("she had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school") to proud ("she always thought the American twang inchoate") to ultimately devastated ("she shrank like a dried leaf") (134). Ifemelu rationally understands that the woman is ignorant, and yet being misjudged, talked down to, and othered affects her acutely: "she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did" (135). The experience affects Ifemelu's outward identity, too. She begins to disguise her accent with an American one, altering her well-established nineteen-year-old voice to better blend in. Though this office exchange takes place over the course of just a page, Adichie includes the employee's first and last name, "Cristina Tomas," a full eight times, emphasizing the woman's impact on Ifemelu. We see how this name sticks with her: three years later, when a telemarketer is surprised to learn she is Nigerian because she sounds "totally American," Ifemelu thanks him—an instinctive response that unsettles her as she realizes it means that "Cristina Tomas . . . had won" (177). She immediately reverts to her Nigerian accent.

Ifemelu's attempts to find a job also reveal how she is affected by her diminished status as a black immigrant in the US, a "hostile territory where Third World middle class can all too easily become First World lower class" (Robbins 144). Because of the terms of her student visa, Ifemelu cannot legally seek employment, yet her scholarship does not pay her rent or buy her food. This new poverty embarrasses Ifemelu and modifies her identity. She cannot afford textbooks for school, and when she asks to borrow them from

classmates, “It stung her, to have to beg” (165). Similarly, when Obinze sends her money from Nigeria, she feels it is supposed to “be the other way around”—the narrative of American opportunity she internalized as a child becomes a further source of shame (178). And in a literal representation of her compromised sense of self, Ifemelu’s aunt advises her to use a stranger’s driver’s license and social security number in order to work. With this new paper identity, Ifemelu applies to innumerable service jobs, and while she sometimes gets interviews, she is never hired. This, too, sends Ifemelu the message that she is an outsider, a bright student who is nevertheless unworthy of being a waitress or a cashier. She blames her inability to get hired on her failure to read American social cues, assuming “it had to be that she was not doing something right” (132). As readers, though, we are reminded of what Ifemelu’s aunt says to reassure her when she worries about adopting the identity of a woman she does not resemble: “All of us look alike to white people” (121). From her time in the US, Ifemelu’s aunt understands that even though she is a doctor and a mother with her own rich history, to the American world at large, she is simply a black woman—physically indistinguishable from all other black women. Adichie illustrates here what form a “denial of individuality” can take, and how it can powerfully undermine the very possibility of bildung: Ifemelu is being trained by the US to expect to remain invisible (Japtok 24).

So, pushed by poverty and panic, Ifemelu responds to a newspaper ad and agrees to give a man a massage “to help him relax,” which she knows is code for some kind of sexual encounter (145). This encounter proves devastating to Ifemelu’s identity, her psychological health, and her close relationships back in Nigeria. Though Ifemelu

attempts to control the situation by telling the man she will not have sex with him, getting paid one hundred dollars to touch and be touched sexually by him proves traumatic.[46] While Ifemelu had previously felt on the "periphery of her own life" in the United States, this trauma makes her feel further disconnected—now even from her own body. She observes that her fingers "no longer belonged to her," and though she wants to shower, she cannot bear to touch herself (156). Ifemelu is doubly traumatized by having elected to participate in the encounter, and she intentionally reminds herself, "She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers" (156). We as readers see that this event highlights not Ifemelu's agency but her lack of choice; her position in the US is profoundly limited by her status as a new African immigrant.

The encounter catalyzes a deep, dangerous depression: Ifemelu stops attending classes, leaves dirty dishes under her bed until they grow mold, and dreams of killing the man from the ad. She also wants to kill herself, but she "had no energy" to think of how to do it (158). America is a place where Ifemelu becomes unknowable to her once confident self, and in a further step of detaching and dissociating from her old life, she cuts all ties with Obinze, ignoring his worried calls and leaving his letters unopened. Communication with Obinze had been the one bright part in her life in the US: "with him, she could feel whatever she felt" (133). While cutting contact may be an attempt at self-protection—ignoring Obinze means not having to articulate the trauma that she

[46] Sexual trauma has a painful legacy in the female American bildungsroman, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *Jasmine* (1989), *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), *Breath Eyes Memory* (1994), Chapter Three's *Winter's Bone* (2006), and *Swamplandia!* (2011).

views as a betrayal of him—it is also a form of self-punishment. Ifemelu's depression makes her long to return to Nigeria, but since she cannot, she tries to block the homeland from her mind entirely. She even stops reading the Nigerian news.

So while Ifemelu traveled thousands of miles to further her education and future in the US, her early experiences as an immigrant send her backwards, and she experiences a poverty and emotional pain she has never known. In the classic narrative, Wilhelm Meister also encounters struggles on his bildung quest, and he ultimately comes to see these difficulties as productive and character building. But though life dramatically improves for Ifemelu with time, it is hard to view her early challenges as an immigrant in the US as anything but personally harmful. Ifemelu's struggles are also unfortunately to be expected; as Alfred J. López notes, the bildungsroman is an "ironic" genre for most immigrant protagonists because the US proves a hostile environment for them (182). López argues that for these protagonists, "achieving their personal *Bildung*" is an "impossibility" because of "the immigrant's status as 'unwanted' surplus labour, as political scapegoat, as racial and cultural Other" (182). The traditional bildungsroman valued, above all else, a protagonist's integration into society in his rightful place; the "irony" of immigrant bildung that López discerns, of course, is that there is no rightful place for an immigrant. This low social position, he says, "always denies [immigrants] full integration into the national corpus" (182). Ifemelu's early experiences in the US certainly bear out López's point. From her mistreatment at the Registrar's office and her inability to get a job, to a roommate accusing her of practicing voodoo, Ifemelu is

inundated with evidence that her new country does not value her intelligence, her voice, her background, or her physical appearance as a black immigrant woman.

A job as a nanny finally lifts Ifemelu out of this depression simply by giving her enough money to meet her basic needs for food and shelter. Nanny or au pair positions are common in bildungsromane with immigrant protagonists; Adichie's Ifemelu, Park's Jane, Mukherjee's Jasmine, and Kincaid's Lucy all serve as au pairs for affluent white families. This fact reflects how commonly immigrant women provide primary childcare in the United States today, a practice that recalls the historic legacy of slave women caring for their owner's children. It is an urban cliché that "the women pushing the strollers are almost always black and the children white" ("Though-Provoking"), though this observation is not simply anecdotal: a 2012 survey by the National Domestic Workers Alliance found that "two-thirds of nannies, housekeepers, and home health aides were immigrants, half of whom were undocumented" (Aviv). The nanny, au pair, or governess position, perhaps most famously depicted in *Jane Eyre*, remains curiously and even disproportionately common in the contemporary female bildungsroman, and not just for immigrant protagonists. *Americanah* and *Re Jane* are part of a handful of recent coming-of-age novels, including Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009) and Leigh Stein's *The Fallback Plan* (2012), that feature college student or recent college graduate protagonists who temporarily work as nannies or au pairs.

Why is the feminized au pair position so common in the bildungsroman? From a basic narrative perspective, the nanny job can catalyze a number of complex, intersecting identity questions for a protagonist—about her goals, her family history, her sexuality,

and her future. For instance, these positions almost always result in the protagonist's complicated adult friendship with the child's mother and an unexpected romantic relationship with the child's father or another close family contact. Often, both of these relationships highlight class and cultural differences. The protagonist may have to navigate tense moments when a child prefers her care over that of his parents. Further, these experiences with surrogate families push coming-of-age protagonists to reflect on marriage and relationship dynamics in a family not their own, reflections that often influence their own lives. Ifemelu, for instance, is turned off by the way her employer Kimberly fawns over her husband, and she is critical of the way that both parents overwhelm their children with choices. Similarly, Esther in *The Fallback Plan* is inspired to make changes in her own life after observing what she deems as selfish, irresponsible behavior from her charge's parents.

These nanny positions also draw particular attention to the ways in which protagonists are different from the families that employ them. Bruce Robbins argues that the au pair narrative in the bildungsroman often relies on a "motif of transgressive trans-class sexuality" (137). He points out that in texts like *Jane Eyre, Lucy,* and *Jasmine,* protagonists experience "upward mobility" as a result of others' attention to their "erotic energies" (137). This attention to the exotic and the erotic certainly plays out in *Americanah*, as Ifemelu's nanny job becomes another site of acute attention to her racial, ethnic, and immigrant otherness. Her encounters with othering are wide-ranging, from well-intentioned if awkward interest in her background to outright discrimination. Kimberly, for instance, is overly enthusiastic about Ifemelu's African-ness. She asks

Ifemelu what her name "means," explaining that she loves "multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures" (180). (Ifemelu responds that she does not know of any meaning behind her name.) Kimberly refers to every black person as "beautiful" or "stunning," a practice that irks Ifemelu until she tells her boss that she "can just say 'black'" because "not every black person is beautiful" (179-80). That exchange, Ifemleu feels, marked the moment in which the women became genuine friends. In interviews, Adichie speaks of Kimberly with fondness, explaining that she is a "type" of liberal American who is so "well-meaning she doesn't know how to deal with race" (Brockes). Similarly, when interviewer Aaron Bady tells Adichie that he is embarrassed when he struggles to pronounce names in African literature, she points out the unnecessary awkwardness or paralysis Americans often feel when talking about race. She asks him:

> Why is it embarrassing? When I used to read these Russian novels when I was growing up, I had no idea how to pronounce the names, so I used to think, ok, this is character whose name starts with an I—you know how they have the Ivan, Ivanovich sorts of things—so I would just say, ok, this is the 'I' character. That's actually very American, your reaction, being embarrassed. Why should you be? No, it's very liberal. To be embarrassed that you think that Igbo and Yoruba names are confusing—but wouldn't they be? You're not a Yoruba or Igbo speaker. I think Polish names are confusing. The Cs and Ss, and the Cs and the Ws come too close together—it throws me off. It's a very liberal thing. (Bady)

Through Ifemelu's blog posts about race relations in the United States, which will be discussed later in this chapter, Adichie similarly explores the reluctance and discomfort many Americans feel when talking about race, discrimination, and stereotypes. She also offers a way forward: as Caroline Levine observes, in Ifemelu's honest exchange with Kimberly, Adichie shows that to "interrupt habits of pretending about race is to usher in new possibilities of relationship and community" (594).

Still, Ifemelu has other experiences as a nanny that leave her feeling unnerved, singled out, and objectified—feelings that affect her view of herself and her background. Kimberly's sister, for instance, tells Ifemelu about meeting a Nigerian pediatrician who was "so well-groomed and well-spoken" that he reminded her of Ifemelu and the "other privileged Africans who are here in this country" (206). When Kimberly hosts a party, guest after guest goes out of their way to tell Ifemelu about their African vacations and especially their African philanthropy work. They boast of work with Botswanan orphanages, Ghanaian NGOs, Kenyan cooperatives, and Malawian water wells to the point that Ifemelu feels personally diminished by their self-congratulatory charity. She "wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy" (208). And finally, in one of Ifemelu's most blatant encounters with racism, a carpet cleaner is visibly surprised when he assumes that she is the owner of the expensive house where she nannies. He is cold and unfriendly to Ifemelu, yet the moment he realizes that she is not the homeowner but an employee, his demeanor changes immediately: "It was like a

conjurer's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (206). Just as Ifemelu cannot forget the first and last name of Cristina Tomas, the employee who demeaned her in the Registrar's Office, she also remains haunted by the image of this man, down to the "bits of dried skin stuck to his chapped, peeling lips" (204).

While her au pair position exposes Ifemelu to a wide range of racial and cultural prejudices, it also allows her to begin to recover from the trauma she experienced after moving halfway across the world and becoming suddenly "black," suddenly poor, and suddenly an immigrant/outsider. But people, of course, are not slates that can be wiped clean, and these painful early experiences have a cumulative, enduring effect on Ifemelu's identity. They affect her romantic relationships in the US, because Ifemelu, from her geographic mutability, has grown permeable: she changes herself to complement her partner. She did not feel malleable growing up in Nigeria, nor does she feel malleable when she returns there over a decade later. In fact, when they were both teenagers, Obinze rebuked her for her self-assuredness and unapologetic personal honesty when she unintentionally hurt him: "The problem is you think everyone is like you. You think you're the norm but you're not" (93). But in the United States, Ifemelu is impressionable, vulnerable, and more eager to fit the norm.

This impressionability is first seen in her romance with Kimberly's cousin, a relationship that dramatically reshapes Ifemelu's life in the US and even her identity. When she starts dating the wealthy Curt, Ifemelu suddenly experiences the luxurious, well-connected life of the American upper class. Curt buys Ifemelu's textbooks for

school (the ones she once had to borrow from classmates), pays all her expenses, and dresses her in cashmere. He takes her all around the world on first-class tickets, and gives Ifemelu "the gift of contentment, of ease" (202). But beyond this lifestyle change, Curt changes the direction of Ifemelu's life in the United States. Adichie emphasizes the way that money—not hard work, not pulling one's self up by the bootstraps—is the real key to the so-called American Dream. Curt's wealth and social position ultimately offer Ifemelu a geographic and professional flexibility that endures after their relationship ends. When Ifemelu graduates from college, Curt uses family connections to find her not only a job, but the rare one that will sponsor her work visa and green card application (204). Ifemelu feels a mix of gratitude and guilt at the vast unfairness of this class system: while some of her friends remain desperate to find employment and secure citizenship, she instead "was a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top" because "Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to go" (204).

Yet Ifemelu's relationship with Curt prompts more than an opportunity-widening lifestyle change, it also radically alters how Ifemelu views herself. This is illustrated in the self-conscious way that she describes her new life with him: Ifemelu "became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares" (198). And while this new identity opens many doors for Ifemelu, it also diminishes her agency because it requires Curt as an antecedent: "she was Curt's Girlfriend," a label Adichie capitalizes like a job title (198). Adichie repeatedly uses language of performance to describe Ifemelu's adoption of this new identity, likening it to a costume change or new part in a play: Ifemelu "*slipped out of her old skin*"; being Curt's partner was "*a role she slipped into* as into a favorite, flattering

dress"; "It was with Curt that she had first looked in the mirror and, with a flush of accomplishment, *seen someone else*" (202, 198, 235, all emphases added). In this newly constructed role, Ifemelu is already observing her own life at a remove.

Ifemelu's other serious romantic relationship in the United States also influences her lifestyle and identity. Blaine is an African American history professor at Yale. Though he and Curt are very different and shape Ifemelu's life in different ways, their profound influence on her illustrates the extent of Ifemelu's malleability. With Curt, Ifemelu became easily accustomed to decadence and impulsive fun; he is her Rochester, offering a moneyed lifestyle. On the other end of the spectrum, life with the serious, accomplished Blaine—her St. John—trains Ifemelu in responsibility, uprightness, and healthy living. Unlike Jane Eyre, though, Ifemelu does not resist being molded by these men: she alters her lifestyle to match her partner. Because Blaine tells Ifemelu she should floss daily (an act she finds "so American"), she begins to; because he is health conscious and fit, she changes her diet and begins exercising (312). Ifemelu recognizes that she is changing, but she reasons that these changes "improved her" because Blaine "was like a salutary tonic" (312).

While Ifemelu is impressed with Blaine's intellectualism and commitment to social justice and racial equality, her own blackness becomes another area in which Blaine finds room for improvement. While "black" is a label imposed on Ifemelu by the US, the interest in race she consequently develops becomes central to her own identity. Inspired by regular encounters with racism, and especially by the consistent, exhausting surprise with which people received her—a dark-skinned black woman—as the girlfriend

of white, handsome, privileged Curt, Ifemelu starts a blog about race. This anonymous blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black," quickly brings Ifemelu fame, speaking engagements, a small fortune, and a fellowship at Princeton. Importantly, it is the first endeavor in the US that she pursues entirely on her own (she obtained her nanny gig with the help of a friend from Nigeria and her post-college public relations job through Curt's connections). As a blogger, Ifemelu adopts a straight shooting, sometimes cheeky tone which Adichie describes as "a persona" that is "different from Ifemelu's voice in her life" (Bady). Ifemelu uses this new register of her voice, the voice initially stifled in the US, to speak up for others who "had become black in America" and also "felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze" (298). She finds this pursuit exciting, nerve-wracking, and a source of new vulnerability; she sometimes fears that her readers are secretly "a judgmental angry mob waiting . . . [to] unmask her" (298). Ifemelu's voice as a race critic is a new, still-forming side of herself, yet the blog makes her voice public and loud to the outside world. This breeds in Ifemelu anxiety over the value of her observations. She feels especially insecure, for example, when readers leave comments on the blog using highly academic language; she worries that they are the real experts, there to expose her as unqualified.

Blaine's interest in her blog also becomes a source of Ifemelu's self-doubt. When they begin dating and she shares her writing with him, she feels initially "thrilled by his interest, graced by his intelligence" (313). But in another instance of Ifemelu's personal malleability, she soon finds that she "began to make changes, to add and remove, because

of what he said" (313). Eventually, she feels the blog posts lose her voice and sound "too academic, too much like him" (313). Reminding Ifemelu of her influential position as cultural commentator, Blaine urges her to give the posts "more depth," and when she pushes back, he calls her lazy (313). Ironically, Ifemelu begins to feels "like his apprentice" on the personal blog she created to explore her own voice and observations (313).

Through these diverse experiences and relationships in the United States, Ifemelu explores different facets of her identity and different iterations of her "self." The more success that Ifemelu achieves, though, the more unsettled and unfulfilled she feels, and the less sure she is of who she has become and who she wants to be. At times, she feels disconnected from her actions and baffled by her own decisions. She cheats on Curt, for instance, and when he breaks up with her in response, she breaks down, unsure of why "she had taken an axe and hacked" at the relationship that "was what she wanted" (291). She also rebels against Blaine, skipping a campus protest that he organizes because she "merely preferred" to attend a colleague's luncheon (the deliberate nonchalance of "merely preferred" underscores the intentionality of her decision) (426). Ifemelu feels there must be "something wrong with her" that would explain her actions, a "hunger, a restlessness" (291-2). It is also, though, easy to read her actions against Curt and Blaine as pushing back against having become so mutable.

Over time, Ifemelu's feelings of restlessness turn into "cement in her soul" (7). She feels "amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living," and these feelings give form to "a piercing homesickness" for

Nigeria after more than a decade abroad (7). So at age thirty-two, thirteen years after immigrating to the United States, Ifemelu breaks up with Blaine, sells her condo, shuts down her blog, and moves back to Lagos. Her voluntary, hopeful return to Nigeria marks a significant revision to traditional immigration narratives. Her return is not prompted by death or tragedy, as it is in Tóibín's *Brooklyn* or Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, nor does she long to return but never get to, like Deighton in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Instead, Ifemelu's decision to return to Nigeria is catalyzed by abstract desire, the growing sense that Nigeria was where she was "supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (6). This conclusion is unusual: as Katie Daily-Bruckner observes, the "identity categories explored alongside being an American are traditionally subsumed in immigrant narratives in favor of American-ness coming out on top" (225). But Ifemelu's decision to return prioritizes her Nigerian-ness.

Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith argues that what is particularly powerful in Ifemelu's decision is the way she privileges her emotions, "not caring whether or not the diaspora home gives superior access to various socio-economic advantages to the migrant than origin home" (31). Ifemelu makes the choice to return, that is, with her heart, not her wallet or her CV. Idowu-Faith calls this a "literary intervention to migration theory" that suggests "a return to the origin home as the closure of every migration" (31). While I agree that Ifemelu's elective return migration is a striking revision to typical narratives of immigration, I also believe that her growing sense of flexibility in the world would make

her resistant to seeing any geographic closure as "final." Adichie herself, for instance, splits her time between the US and Nigeria.

Davies's politics of location are also meaningful here, in particular her consideration of "the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances" (153). Through this lens, Ifemelu's choice to go back to Nigeria is empowered movement. She views her return as one of her finest accomplishments: "Ifemelu looked unbelievingly at herself. She had done it. She had come back" (388). Some of Ifemelu's previous personal and geographic migrations, however, were less empowered. Her movement *to* the US, for instance, relied on chance. Though Ifemelu was granted a student visa on her first try, many of her classmates, also desperate to finish their degrees, were repeatedly denied them (a local nun even hosted weekly "Student Visa Miracle Vigils" to bless students' visa applications) (99). Subsequently, despite the great geographic distance covered to reach the US, Ifemelu's mobility was starkly limited by poverty, her social status as a black woman and an immigrant, and a general sense of shame and self-blame. And yet, the moment her blog becomes a success, Ifemelu is granted privileged access to a wider range of spaces. Ironically, achieving the elusive American Dream gives Ifemelu the flexibility to reject it, and she goes back to Nigeria to keep searching, developing, and learning about herself. Further, from a feminist perspective, Ifemelu's relative nonchalance in her decision to split from Blaine reveals a different aspect of her personal growth: she no longer sees being related to a successful man as offering her the most

satisfactory ending. She would rather be single and still exploring than stifled and unfulfilled in her romantic attachment.

The new (old) location of Lagos becomes another site of Ifemelu's ongoing identity formation, and it particularly highlights how she has changed in the US. Her old friends lightheartedly tease her for turning into an "Americanah," someone who comes back to Nigeria with American affectations, and she is forced to recognize a new snobbery in herself. When, "with the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch," she calls a new house ugly, her childhood friend points out the building's impressively large generator (393). Ifemelu is bothered not to have noticed it herself: it "piqued her. This was what a true Lagosian should have noticed: the generator house, the generator size" (393). Similarly, Ifemelu attends a "Nigerpolitan" club event, a meeting of elite Nigerians who lived abroad and came back "all dripping with savoir faire" (408). With "Nigerpolitan," Adichie is playing on the term "Afropolitan," a label coined in a 2005 essay by writer and artist Taiye Selasi to describe elite young Africans with a newly global perspective. Selasi describes this group as "the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you." The term has been popularized, though it also has sharp critics—including Adichie. She rejects the label for what she considers its reductive view of Africa, explaining: "I'm not an Afropolitian. I'm African, happily so. I'm comfortable in the world, and it's not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African and don't think they need a new term" (Barber). Adichie's Ifemelu similarly plans to reject the "Nigerpolitans" she meets, and is thus troubled to instead feel a sense of kinship. Ifemelu tries to feel superior to the

pretentious group by intentionally disagreeing with their opinions, but is soon forced to acknowledge how comfortable she feels and how quickly she shares her own longing for America's "[l]ow-fat soy milk, NPR, fast Internet" (408). With this event, Adichie emphasizes how experience, place, and time can also alter identity in ways we do not desire; not all "development" is positive or welcome. And while Ifemelu's professional identity and many of her personal experiences in the US revolved around race and blackness (a blackness first imposed on her by American society and then reclaimed by her through her blogging), these categories feel immediately irrelevant in Nigeria: she "got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (475). This affects her writing, which becomes more broadly focused since "race doesn't really work" in Nigeria (475). Ifemelu's artistic, intellectual, and racial identities intersect and change based on where she is.

In other ways, though, Ifemelu slips easily back into her Nigerian lifestyle, especially in her communication style. She reflects, "I started feeling truly at home again when I started being bombastic!" (430). For instance, when she is displeased with how a hairdresser styles her hair or how a contractor lays tile on her floor, she is quick with scathing rebukes—regaining "the false bravado, the easy resort to threats" (395). In the most significant revival of her old life in Nigeria, Ifemelu reconnects with Obinze, now married and father to a young daughter. The two begin a life-altering affair. As is typical in today's bildungsroman, and especially in the *weiterbildungsroman*, a protagonist's most significant romantic experience may now come years after her first romantic encounter. Indeed, for Ifemelu and Obinze, whose connection had been strong as

teenagers, this second stage of romance has a revolutionary power and depth. Ifemelu reflects, "This was love, to be eager for tomorrow"—"this" here signaling a new understanding of love that transcends her previous experiences.

Her return to Nigeria and to Obinze influences Ifemelu's sense of self in other significant ways, too. Ifemelu finds she can finally process the sexual trauma she experienced thirteen years before that caused her to cut all ties with Obinze. She had been sure that she "would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story," and for thirteen years in the United States, this proved true (160). Yet back in Lagos, in only her second meeting with Obinze, she tells him easily; going "home" allows her to process this trauma.

We also see changes in Ifemelu when she and Obinze stormily end their renewed relationship over his marital status. First, Ifemelu's deep pain over this rupture further underscores how incomparably important the romance had been to her; she mourns it like a death. She felt "a sense of unassailable loss, a great burden" and understands that "[t]his was what the novelists meant by suffering. She had often thought it a little silly, the idea of suffering for love, but now she understood" (473). But most meaningfully, despite this grief—or even spurred by it—Ifemelu experiences a new sense of contentment and personal understanding. She reflects, "Still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (475). This is different from her reaction to her breakup with Curt, where she is deeply regretful for cheating and confused by her actions, finally blaming her own "incomplete knowledge of herself" as causing the breakup (291-2). But Ifemelu's subsequent

experiences, especially her journey back to Nigeria, help her gain a more complete knowledge of herself. This personal development over time is also well-illustrated in Ifemelu's writing. While she once adjusted her blog posts to better fit what Blaine wanted, after breaking up with Obinze, she instead "wrote her blog posts wondering what he would make of them" (474). She is not altering her writing for Obinze, she is instead picturing how he might engage with what she is sharing of herself. Ifemelu also recognizes that Obinze is the only partner who ever made her feel "truly heard," and implicit in this observation is the realization that she had felt somehow compromised or unseen in previous relationships (454). But significantly, this realization ultimately leads to her *not* needing Obinze as a witness; it is after their separation that she feels fully formed, and Adichie's language "spun *herself* into being" makes clear that Ifemelu is responsible for her personal development. Where once she was permeable, Ifemelu has now made herself firm.

Ifemelu's decision to return to Nigeria reflects her view, and a larger US cultural view, of identity formation and development as extended and ongoing. For Ifemelu, this thinking reflects her own dramatically changed conception of adulthood. Early on in the US, while serving as a nanny after a period of deep depression, Ifemelu is bothered by the way her boss's sister desperately caters to her young daughter ("Do you want this one, sweetheart? The yellow or the blue or the red? Which do you want?") (169). Ifemelu reflects, "To overwhelm a child of four with choices, to lay on her the burden of making a decision, was to deprive her of the bliss of childhood. Adulthood, after all, already loomed, where she would have to make grimmer and grimmer decisions" (169). As a new

black immigrant who feels mistreated and stuck in the US, Ifemelu comes to view adulthood as simply the painful negotiation of limited choices. This realization is all the more devastating because the original draw of the US was that it would offer "that sublime thing: choice" (Davidson). Yet in those early days in the US, choice comes to be not freeing but taxing for Ifemelu. Yet because of her other experiences over the next decade, Ifemelu finds, at age thirty-two, that the open-ended choices of adulthood can also be exciting and desirable. This changed viewpoint is illustrated in Ifemelu's consumption of Nigerian media while in the US. When she was profoundly depressed, she had to cut ties with Nigeria to survive, even stopping herself from reading the Nigerian news because it made her ache to be home. Yet when she appears to be thriving in the US personally and professionally, she reaches back to her home country; she "scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs" for evidence that she should return (6).

Americanah shares a number of parallels with Kincaid's now-classic bildungsroman *Lucy* (1990). Desperate to leave the smallness of colonial Antigua and the religious, cultural, and gendered limitations imposed on her by her country and family, Lucy pinned all her hopes for direction and personal happiness on the US. Like Ifemelu, she comes to the country alone at age nineteen for increased opportunity and continued education. She, too, becomes a nanny for an affluent white family, and she also develops a complicated friendship with her employer, who, like Ifemelu's boss Kimberly, awkwardly dotes on Lucy's blackness. Both young women date relatives or close friends of their employers. Like Ifemelu, Lucy finds her new country immediately disappointing

and becomes overwhelmed with sadness. In another meaningful parallel, both protagonists discover artistic expression in the US—Ifemelu becomes a famed blogger, and Lucy is drawn to photography.

Because of these initial similarities, the novels' different endings suggest a possible ideological shift in the female American bildungsroman between 1990 and 2013, when each was written. Ifemelu's ending is romantic, hopeful, and open-ended. Seven months after their break up, Obinze comes to her door. Now separated from his wife, he begs Ifemelu for another chance. She stares at him for "a long time" and, in the novel's last words, invites him in. While their future is left ambiguous, her new empowered fulfillment suggests that Ifemelu will continue to develop personally in this renewed context of partnership. For Lucy, the future seems far less hopeful. In the novel's final scene, she is also in her apartment. She has left her nanny job for more independence, begun working for a photographer, and enrolled in a photography class for pleasure. In the same way that Ifemelu feels that she "had done it" and "had spun herself into being," Lucy has, in many ways, "spun herself into being," too. And she recognizes this, reflecting that what she has done "was not a small accomplishment" (161). Yet she feels deeply unhappy, and this sense of isolation colors the novel's very last sentences as Lucy sits before a blank journal:

> At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: 'I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it.' And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much

that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur. (164)

In stark contrast to the optimistically ambiguous, forward-looking ending of *Americanah*, Lucy weeps for herself and her future. She defines her whole being—Lucy Josephine Potter—by her failure to love and connect deeply. While Ifemelu has gained a clearer understanding of herself, Lucy sees only "one great big blur" (164).

These disparate endings reveal how differently the United States has affected both women's views of their homelands and their histories. Lucy is surprised to find herself homesick for a place she disliked, but unlike Ifemelu, she still asserts that she "never wanted to live in that place again" (51). Living in the US magnifies Lucy's sense that her West Indian homeland's history of colonial rule and slavery stunted her development: "I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant" (95). For Ifemelu, on the other hand, time in the US makes her nostalgic for Nigeria, and she jealously feels that other expats who have gone home to Nigeria are "living her life" (6). Nigeria's history does not factor as directly into Ifemelu's identity, perhaps in a representation of what Adichie has called a "larger Nigerian political culture that is steeped in denial, in looking away" ("Hiding").[47] When Ifemelu returns to the country after more than a decade away, however, she sees its rampant corruption and ethnic and regional conflicts more clearly through adult eyes. When she is searching for an apartment, for example, a man's initial

[47] Adichie's previous novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), however, offers an account of the devastating Biafran War (1967-1970), a war in which both of Adichie's grandfathers died as refugees (Adichie, "The Story").

refusal to rent to her shocks her: "'I do not rent to Igbo people,' he said softly, startling her. Were such things now said so easily? Had they been said so easily and had she merely forgotten?" (487).

Central to Ifemelu's more open-ended view of adulthood is the growing sense that choices can be revised or overturned. This flexibility is a new privilege granted by Ifemelu's citizenship status, her financial means, and her age. Ifemelu is filled with both excitement and doubt over her decision to return to Nigeria, but her American citizenship emboldens her to go; upon arrival in humid Lagos, she reminds herself that her passport "shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay" (390). Similarly, with the success of her blog and a recently-sold condo, international plane tickets are no longer prohibitively expensive for Ifemelu as they once were, so not only can she change her mind, she can also simply travel back and forth—finances do not require that she settle firmly in only one place. As an older bildungsroman protagonist, Ifemelu's age is also significant in her personal and geographic flexibility. At the beginning of her time in the US, she feels her age limits her. She contrasts her cultural illiteracy with the seamless acclimation of her childhood friend, who "had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth" (126). Poverty and depression also foreshortened her view of the future at that time; she was worried about each day and each meal. But at thirty-two, Ifemelu has had multiple relationships, multiple jobs, and multiple journeys, and these cumulative and wide-ranging experiences allow her to see the future as open-ended.

Re Jane—Rewriting Jane Eyre, Remapping American Womanhood

In *Re Jane* (2015), Patricia Park presents another variation on the traditional immigration story. While Ifemelu comes to the US as a legal adult with a strong sense of self, Jane comes almost completely unformed: as a six-month-old infant. Jane is born in Korea to an American father and a Korean mother. According to the story she is told, her father abandoned her mother, her mother died, and her own biracial makeup made her a social pariah in Korea even as an infant. So, she was sent to live in the US with her Korean aunt and uncle—themselves new immigrants adjusting to American life. Jane stays in their densely Korean neighborhood in Queens until she is twenty-two, acutely aware of the "geographical irony" of traveling "nearly seven thousand miles across the globe . . . only to end up in the second-largest Korean community in the Western world" (19).

Park designs the novel as a contemporary retelling of the most famous story of female coming of age, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* This literary recycling is common: British coming-of-age classics like *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Great Expectations* are revisited again and again in film and TV adaptations, theatrical productions, and fan fiction.[48] The effect of these texts' mass popularity is that we know the stories well; "the characters and plot are kind of in our air and water by now,"

[48] Despite being more than two centuries old, *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, has in the last two decades been turned into a cult classic BBC miniseries, a Bollywood-style film (*Bride and Prejudice*), and a parody novel (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*), and it inspired an Emmy-award winning YouTube series ("The Lizzie Bennet Diaries"). Most recently, it has been updated for the twenty-first century reality TV show era in Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Eligible* (2016). Sittenfeld wrote this novel as part of "The Austen Project," where six contemporary authors reimagine Austen's six novels.

according to Juliette Wells, who studies the enduring popularity of Jane Austen (Alter).[49] In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys famously offers *Jane Eyre* a postcolonial prequel. The novel's relationship to Brontë's text lends it an even greater political power, as Rhys gives voice, depth, and a history to Rochester's "madwoman in the attic," Bertha Mason (or Antoinette Cosway, as she is born in Jamaica).

Similarly, Park assumes that her readers know *Jane Eyre* and relies on them to catch how closely she hews to the novel's plot. Like Jane Eyre, Jane Re is parentless and raised by relatives. She, too, becomes a live-in nanny and begins a romance with her charge's father; she also flees the home and discovers new family members who nurture her desire for connection. Park includes numerous direct allusions to her source text (Jane Re's father, for instance, is named Currer Bell, Brontë's penname; Jane becomes a nanny at 646 Thorn Street, her Brooklyn version of Thornfield Hall). In light of the close plot parallels, Park's deviations from Brontë's novel become especially meaningful. I will concentrate on these narrative revisions, particularly Park's alterations to Jane's background and to the novel's ending. As with Ifemelu (and Jane Eyre, Wilhelm Meister, Paul Morel, and many others before her), Jane's interior journey of development parallels her physical journey, and so I also uncover the ways that immigrant status, geography, and social and ethnic alterity affect Jane's development and sense of self as she moves—from Queens to Brooklyn, Brooklyn to Seoul, and Seoul to Queens.

[49] Wells says this in reference to Jane Austen's mass popularity, though this also proves true for other classic British writers.

One of Park's most significant revisions is that Jane is a biracial Korean-American immigrant. Park has called her novel a "post-modern mash-up," and by linking a contemporary immigrant subject with a canonical bildungsroman, she suggests that the "typical" coming-of-age story in the US is now transnational, multiethnic, and multilingual (Foster). Eugenides has observed the political and literary power of this kind of revision. He theorizes, "What the children of Jewish immigrants did for the American novel in the last 50 years, the American children of Korean or Chinese immigrants are doing today." These authors reinvent the novel, Eugenides observes, "not by writing about comfort women or foot-binding—by giving history lessons, that is," but instead by "graft[ing] the shoot of their own cultural experience onto the tree of American literature." Almost perfectly anticipating Park's novel, Eugenides says that this fiction works "not [by] telling us what it was like in Beijing a hundred years ago but telling us what it's like in Queens or Columbus today" ("What is the 'Multicultural' Novel").

Like *Americanah*, *Re Jane* illustrates an immigrant protagonist's various linguistic negotiations, and Park uses Korean phrases throughout the novel, particularly for concepts that have no direct translation in English but affect Jane's quotidian life, such as *nunchi*, the careful attention to social decorum (5), and *tap-tap-hae*, a sense of profound physical or psychological anxiety (8). Further emphasizing that Jane's identity exists in two languages, Park even includes an appendix of "Korean Family Terms" to guide the reader. In light of these contemporary revisions, author Alexander Chee praises *Re Jane* on the book's jacket as "a novel for the country we are still becoming."

In another significant revision, Park shifts the focus of development into early adulthood. While Brontë introduces us to Jane at age ten, apart from flashbacks, Park's narrative skips Jane's childhood, adolescence, and education altogether. Instead, we meet Jane at twenty-two, just out of college and unemployed; the novel offers another example of the *weiterbildungsroman*. Like *Jane Eyre*, *Re Jane* is written in the first person, and even includes Brontë's classic metafictional addresses to the reader. Yet while the intimacy of the first-person perspective allows us to follow Jane's thoughts and emotional responses, it also exposes the extent to which Jane's identity formation has been stifled by her environment and circumstances. While readers witness Jane Eyre develop a precocious self-awareness and a deep passion for learning even as a child, Jane Re is simply harder to know—we do not learn about her likes and dislikes because she has had little room to explore them herself.

Instead, Jane Re has always been weighed down by her genetic inheritance: her dead mother's "shameful" reputation and the reflection of that reputation in Jane's own biracial physical features. Jane is taught that her mother was a "loose, foolish woman who'd been abandoned by her American boyfriend" (88), and she is warned not to "dare to grow up to become like her" (18). While Jane's immigration to the US was designed to widen her opportunities, her familial, cultural, and socio-ethnic environment in Flushing, Queens constrains her personal development. Unlike Ifemelu, who feels like an outsider in an American society that sees only her blackness, Jane's primary source of exclusion actually comes from this ethnic enclave. Jane calls her insular environment "all Korean, all the time," and as a result, Jane's primary identification is as Korean, not American or

Korean American (3). Indeed, her community uses the label "American" specifically to refer to white people; Jane's childhood friend, for instance, has "an American boyfriend" (11). Jane's origin story is widely known in this community, and she recalls being taunted over it by classmates as a child. As an adult, Jane still feels a "rise of shame whenever Flushing cast its collective eye" on her, and being stigmatized as the unwanted product of shameful misbehavior retards Jane's personal development and individuation (289). Further, Jane feels that her physical features confirm her as "bad-born" (102). As a *honhyol* or "a mixed-blood" (18), she stands out as physically different from the rest of her community: her face is "not Korean" but "Korean-ish," and "different from every single other face in that church basement" (15).

Not only is Jane limited by the reputation she inherits, she is also constantly expected to atone for her mother's recklessness with selflessness, work, and personal responsibility. Even twenty-two years after immigrating to the US, she is regularly reminded "how lucky" she is and how "grateful" she should be that her aunt and uncle took her in. Her relatives are certainly less intentionally cruel than Jane Eyre's aunt Mrs. Reed, who, on her deathbed, still refused Jane's offer of reconciliation. But Park's Jane is, like the original orphan, made to feel like a nuisance instead of an adopted child. This sense of otherness or inferiority taxes her; there is little room for Jane's personal development because she is repeatedly given the message that she deserves less. As a child, she does heavy physical labor at her uncle's grocery store though his children, her cousins, do not. She is allowed to "tack on" a brief piano lesson after her cousins are finished with theirs, and is reminded how lucky she is to do this. Jane's subordination is

well-illustrated in her uncle's rules for her, which include his deflating order to "no act like you so special" alongside the trivial rule that she not chew gum (6). As a result of being treated as inferior, Jane is trained to minimize her burden on others and make responsible choices. For instance, while the cousin with whom she shares a bedroom goes to Barnard College, Jane does not feel she can ask her uncle to help pay the private tuition at Columbia, so she hides her acceptance letter, goes to a local public university, and is then ridiculed for not getting in to a more prestigious school. Jane is thus doubly burdened by the "model minority" stereotype *and* the expectation of invisibility.[50] In turn, Jane assumes a personal responsibility that becomes the "sole impetus" behind every choice she makes, rather than acting out of interest or desire. Unlike Jane Eyre, who develops a passion for teaching and for "enjoy[ing] my own faculties," Jane Re sensibly double majors in accounting and finance without ever showing any interest in these (or any) subjects (364). Overwhelming responsibility at once ages Jane and makes her inexperienced; by twenty-two, her personal development is curtailed, and she admits she does not really know what people her age "do."

Throughout the novel, Jane's identity evolves—sometimes dramatically—based on where she is geographically. These changes are reflected in her sense of self, her language use, her feelings about her family and background, and even sometimes in her physical appearance. Park emphasizes the significance of location for Jane by consistently referring to each site by its full physical address. For instance, Jane lives at

[50] For analysis on the wide-ranging effects of this cultural stereotype, see Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin's *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (2008) and Ellen Wu's *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (2013).

"718 Gates Street, Unit 1" in Queens (mentioned thirteen times in the novel) and then moves to "646 Thorn Street" in Brooklyn (referenced fourteen times). Across the globe, Jane's initial disorientation in Seoul is also represented through location: Jane struggles to find her way because buildings are marked with numbers indicating the order in which they were built, rather than with street addresses. Thus, she lives with extended family at "Building 404, Unit 1801," an address mentioned only once.

Aside from her immigration to the US in infancy, Jane's first move is a short one: from Flushing, Queens to Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. There, she becomes a live-in nanny, like Ifemelu and many other coming-of-age heroines before her. Jane is initially resistant to take this humble job, which she calls a "backup plan"—echoing the title of *The Fallback Plan*, another recent bildungsroman about an "underemployed" college graduate. This job, however, and her move away from the repressive family home in Queens, dramatically catalyzes the development of Jane's identity.

Though it is only a subway ride away, Jane describes Brooklyn as a foreign country, and like Ifemelu, she feels disoriented by the customs, lingo, and expectations of her new environment. Park satirizes the family that employs Jane as comically progressive and feminist: Beth, in a recuperative redesign of the role of Bertha Mason, is a women's studies professor. She and her husband, Ed, the Rochester-figure, have adopted a daughter from China. Like a foreign land, their household also requires translation for Jane: Jane mistakes a juicer for a meat grinder, and she peels fruit she thinks is rotten only to be told, "Oh, sweetie. It's supposed to look like that. It's *organic*" (46).

Jane is not only an immigrant-outsider in Flushing and in Brooklyn, but also in Beth's academic world, which becomes a site for new assaults on her sense of self. Jane gets lost in the household's academic speak; Beth, for instance, cannot tell her daughter a fairytale without adding her own postcolonial commentary:

> "A long time ago, in a land far away . . ." Beth started, stopped. "That's always been a problematic beginning for me. Asserting 'nearness' and 'farness'''—her fingers crunched into air quotes—"just screams cultural imperialism. As if our geographical locale is somehow the normative?" (45-6)

Beth enthusiastically introduces Jane to seminal feminist texts, promising her that they "will do great things" for her personal development (61). But when Jane attempts to try out this academic discourse herself, Park shows how language—even if in the same tongue—can be used as a barrier to opportunity and inclusion. Jane tries to engage with Beth's colleague, commenting tentatively, "I find your . . . dialectic on . . . femininity . . . um, interesting" (79). The amused colleague patronizes her, "You mean my discourse on 'the feminine.' Yes, yes, and what facet of it exactly did you find interesting? . . . Please—take *all* the time you need" (80, emphasis in orginal). Beth joins in, telling her colleague not to be "too hard" on Jane since she had "never once been exposed to this kind of material" before she met Beth and Ed, and the pair continues talking about Jane as a case study in naiveté. Damningly, Park uses Jane's grasp of the very material to which Beth exposed her to illustrate how this class-based intellectual and linguistic exclusion affects her: Jane reflects, "[As they] went on, talking about me as if I weren't there, I recalled an article she'd made me read about how Victorian men gangbanged

women with language" (80). By linking "language" with the incredibly violent word, "gangbang," Park emphasizes that words, too, have an incredible power to demean and violate.

Like the affluent white employers in *Lucy* and *Americanah*, Beth, although she means well, also makes Jane feel like an ethnic outsider. This is compounded by the fact that as a progressive, well-read academic, Beth wants very badly to make Jane, as well as her own Asian daughter, feel culturally supported and included. So when she assumes Jane is Chinese, not Korean, Beth worries Jane will think her a "culturally insensitive boor" (28). Then, after being overly enthusiastic about meeting Jane's relatives, Beth mistakes the first Korean man she sees in the family's grocery store for Jane's uncle. Jane feels that to Beth, "we all looked alike" (55)—echoing Ifemelu's aunt's sense that "[a]ll of us look alike to white people" (121). To be black or Asian in the US can mean feeling that one's individuality is invisible to others. Just as Adichie uses the character of Kimberly to comment on Americans' discomfort about discussing race, Park shows that having these conversations in highly stylized academic language can be similarly superficial. In another instance, Beth reduces Jane to an anthropological research subject. She tells her, "My colleague's doing some *fascinating* research on Queens. She'll just ride your trains for *hours*" (56). Park illustrates how Jane immediately feels othered by these comments: "*Your trains*, I thought. *Your trains*" (56, emphases in original).

Despite these uncomfortable encounters, the nanny position and life in Brooklyn empower Jane. Park thus invokes perhaps the most traditional function of the bildungsroman quest: a protagonist must physically leave her home or community in

order to find her adult path, purpose, or position in the economy. Away from her family's and community's rigid expectations, Jane is granted more space to explore herself and develop: she has her own bedroom for the first time, she earns money, and she forges a meaningful relationship with Devon, the young girl she babysits. Just as Jane Eyre grows up in part by guiding young Adele, Jane Re's connection with Devon also teaches her about herself, particularly as she helps the young girl cope with the loneliness she feels from being racially different from her family and peers. Jane Re's short stint as a nanny incorporates numerous traditional coming-of-age experiences. She pushes back against her uncle's authoritarianism and she has her first romantic experience, kissing a stranger in a bar. She also begins a romance with her employer, Ed, and loses her virginity to him (unlike Jane Eyre, she participates in adultery). During her time as a nanny in Brooklyn, Jane's voice becomes a bit louder, and in some ways, she begins to lighten up, to not feel so heavily burdened by responsibility. She makes a close friend who teaches her "what girls our age did with their nights off" (her answer: they go to bars), and she feels as if she is catching up developmentally (92). Once, after tentatively cracking a joke to Ed, she reflects on this personal growth: "A year ago—six months ago, even—I never would have attempted a joke like that" (116).

Thus, while Jane's rapid development during this brief period is obvious even to her, she also feels as if this growth is fragile and geographically dependent. She finds that even a short stay back at her aunt and uncle's house can set her back:

> In the days away from Thorn Street, everything I learned at the Mazer-Farley household began to disappear. . . . I'd stop myself from asking a *nunchi*-less

> question while helping out in the kitchen or slicing fruit without peeling it first. Shedding newly acquired customs and reassimilating to a former way of life is a painful transition. I could not beat against the forceful current of Sang and Hannah's ways, and as the days passed, I had no choice but to acquiesce—borne back to the rhythms of the past. (108)

This passage recalls the last line of *The Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." The resonance is both syntactic and semantic, as Nick Carraway reflects on how Jay Gatsby's dreams were at once stimulated and undermined by his own history and desire to rewrite the past with Daisy. For Jane, her old, repressive environment in Flushing makes the rhythms of the past overwhelmingly powerful, and they are personally diminishing. The contrast between Jane's identity in Brooklyn and her identity in Queens further exposes how the austere conditions of her upbringing affect her personal development.

The notion that Jane's childhood and early adult development have been in some ways arrested shapes Park's revisions to the Jane-Rochester love story. On the one hand, Park gives her Jane more agency: while Jane Eyre nearly weds Rochester not knowing he is married, Jane Re begins her brief affair with Ed while she is employed by him *and his wife* to care for their daughter. While it is decidedly less idealistic and feminist, Park's literary update reflects a more contemporary psychological understanding of the potential developmental effects of childhood neglect. Jane Re lacks Jane Eyre's self-confidence. Jane Eyre, for instance, famously declares, "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (296). But

while Jane Eyre's childhood mistreatment pushes her to recognize her own value ("I have an inward treasure born with me"), Jane Re's bleak upbringing makes her only less sure of herself and her worth (191). She later reflects that she began her relationship with Ed—a relationship carried on at Beth's expense—because she craved affection. She explains, "When I first met Ed Farley, I had been starved for love. He was the first man I'd ever known to show me kindness. He had taken my loneliness away" (320).

Jane's relationship with Ed also initiates new personal and geographic changes: when Jane begins to grasp how she has disrupted this family, she physically removes herself from the situation by flying to Seoul, South Korea. While Jane Eyre fled Thornfield Hall to protect her own reputation, Jane Re guiltily escapes to Korea to prevent further hurt to Beth and her daughter. Embraced in Korea by her maternal aunt, Jane decides to restart her life there and stay indefinitely. Contemporary immigration is again shown here to be multidirectional and fluid, but unlike Ifemelu, who returns to a country she knows well and has longed for, Jane chooses to go back to a country she cannot remember. Because she grew up among Koreans, Jane is surprised by Korea's foreignness, and she initially feels insecure negotiating the cultural and linguistic differences. She is disappointed to learn that she speaks Korean "like an American" (148)—her vocabulary and cadence are stilted because "the Korean of Flushing was a holdover from the sixties and seventies" (160). When she uses a dated word for "bathroom," a coffee shop barista tells her, "You are very awkward-sounding!" (164). Significantly, Jane's return to her birth country poses more linguistic challenges than

does Ifemelu's move to the US, and she describes her inability to communicate "all the subtleties and nuances of language" as a "linguistic loneliness" (180-1).

But despite these challenges, Jane finds in Korea, as in Brooklyn, an opportunity for reinvention. Park's careful attention to the dramatic changes in Jane's sense of self in Seoul further emphasizes the relationship among identity formation, movement, and place in the contemporary female bildungsroman, as well as the global dimension of this relationship. Jane finds her new environment liberating, especially as it obscures her family story: "Here was nothing like Flushing. How freeing it was! . . . Here I was completely anonymous; no one knew my history" (172). Yet while Seoul is a place Jane can escape her origin story, it is also the only place she can finally learn more about it. From her aunt, Jane discovers falsities in the narrative she grew up with: her father was not a GI who left her and her mother, but instead, in a political revision by Park, he was a Peace Corps volunteer. And like Jane Eyre's parents, who died of typhus after her father contracted the illness while helping the poor, Jane Re's father and mother died of carbon monoxide poisoning while on a volunteer trip together. These new details immediately change Jane's view not only of her parents, but of herself. She asks her aunt to repeat again that her father had not been a GI; for Jane, this new information "changes everything":

> Who my father was changed what kind of person my mother had been. It wasn't so much that I was the kid of a GI; it was that my mother hadn't just been his one-night stand, the way everyone back in Flushing thought of her. She hadn't been thrown away and left behind. *She's a fool if she thinks for a second that her*

> *American father wants to take her back*. But this picture, too, revised my whole history—[uncle] Sang had been wrong. I had been wanted. (246-7)

Further, like Jane Eyre's discovery of her cousins St. John, Mary, and Diana, Jane Re's newfound relationship with her aunt is also deeply important. She reflects, "Here, in Korea, I made a connection I had always felt was missing my whole life and had now found with Emo. She was the mother I'd never had" (240). By returning to her birth country, Jane gains an aunt and reclaims her mother and a father; significantly, these family gains in both the past and the present make her feel more cared for and loved.

Seeing herself through the eyes of a different population also affects Jane's identity. Just as Ifemelu is surprised to learn that she is considered "black" in the US, in Korea Jane is surprised to find she is considered beautiful. The biracial features that originally prompted her family to send her to the US and that make her a pariah in Flushing are, she discovers, idealized in contemporary Korean society. Guided by her aunt, she begins to change her physical appearance: she spends an hour each day applying makeup and ditches her sneakers for high heels. Though Jane delights in being suddenly noticed by "the world" because of her "newfound beauty," she also repeatedly calls it "an act" (169). Still, she embraces life in Korea and finds a teaching job. She becomes engaged to a Korean man, but longing for the newly-divorced Ed, she ultimately ends the relationship and returns to New York. She brings back with her new clarity: in Korea, she reflects, "I was trying to be someone I wasn't" (248). This, too, recalls Jane Eyre's failed attempt to imagine a life with St. John Rivers. As Jane Eyre's rejection of

St. John's proposal leads her back to Rochester, Jane's rejection of her fiancé ultimately clarifies her enduring feelings for Ed, leading to their reconciliation.

Jane's "year and a season" in Korea makes her feel more deeply connected to the US and Queens, just as Ifemelu's time in the US illuminates her homesickness for Nigeria (265). Davies argues that "the rewriting of home" can be significant "in the articulation of identity," and this proves true for Jane (115). Going to Korea allows Jane to reclaim and revise her origin story; leaving it when she feels unfulfilled deepens her sense of Americanness. Back in the US, she feels newly empowered in her identity as a New Yorker. This shift is illustrated when a new acquaintance asks her where she is "originally from" (300). She explains:

> When you're a person with an ethnic tinge, you get asked this all the time. After I named my neighborhood, the rounds of inquisitions usually didn't stop until I gave them the answer they wanted to hear: 'Korea' or 'Asia.' . . . And that was how I *always used* to answer the question, too. Until I went "back there" and *learned that that place was not my home*. 'I'm from Queens,' I said. 'I grew up in Flushing.' (300, emphasis added)

Jane's multidirectional global movement ultimately makes her feel more confident about herself, her identity ties, and her home.

Park breaks most dramatically from Brontë's narrative in *Re Jane's* ending. Jane Eyre, of course, marries Rochester, nurses him back to health, and bears a son. Jane Re, on the other hand, ends her relationship with Ed ("Reader, I left him") when he wants her to move in with him (321). She reasons, "I was just starting out on my new life. Was I

ready to put an end to that?" (291). She decides that she is not. Like Eugenides, Park rewrites the marriage plot to show that the contemporary Jane ultimately privileges her own continued exploration and personal discovery. Partnership, she feels, would limit her, and so she continues on her quest. Like Ifemelu, Jane ultimately favors personal exploration over a fine but somewhat stifling romantic relationship; it is agency, not a man, that now offers the most satisfying endpoint. If Jane might someday marry, she feels no rush (indeed, she has broken an engagement and ended another serious relationship). This radical narrative revision reflects changes in contemporary bildung for women—its endpoints are changed, its timelines extended.

This view of development as flexible and continuous shapes the novel's final scene. While Jane Eyre narrates her story of marital equality and personal fulfillment looking back from a distance of ten years, Park's Jane Re ends her story mid-action: she is riding a train, en route to a friend's wedding. The bride is hoping to play matchmaker for Jane, and Jane agrees to the set up, reasoning, "Sure, why not" (337). She explains to the reader, "I try to keep an open mind" (337). Indeed, this new open-mindedness now shapes Jane's view of herself and her options.

Jane's geographic movements in early adulthood are central to her coming into what she calls this "new life" (291). She is an immigrant multiple times over, and like Ifemelu, she accrues wide-ranging experiences—with people, places, and prejudice; with languages and jobs; and with her own ethnic identity. Once personally limited by her mother's reputation and a burdensome sense of responsibility, Jane had "charted out" her adult path "with decision trees and spreadsheets" (272). But Jane's formative experiences

and journeys in her early-to-mid-twenties change her view of the future and emphasize identity formation as a continuous process; she sees life as less possible to map out. Reflecting Jane's embrace of this flexibility, the novel's end is emphatically positive. Jane, like Ifemelu, begins to *spin herself into being*—she starts a property management firm with a friend and, using money she inherits from her grandfather, buys a house. Thanks in part to the family knowledge she gains in Korea, Jane repairs her relationship with her uncle—as Jane Eyre never can with the stubborn Mrs. Reed. Jane and Beth, Ed's ex-wife, also reconcile and become very dear friends. Most significantly, she feels at peace with herself, unwilling to "keep apologizing . . . for who I was" (330).

Immigration, Mobility, Mutability, and New Happy Endings

Both *Americanah* and *Re Jane* tell stories of women who come to the United States and then, at some point, leave it. In these novels, Adichie and Park adapt the generic tradition of migration and mobility to capture contemporary experiences of immigration and coming of age. As a result, their protagonists negotiate multiple languages, multiple cultures, and multiple geographic sites along their coming-of-age paths. Like contemporary conceptions of development as continuous and open-ended, immigration in these novels also lacks predetermined endpoints. Instead, and despite vast differences in their circumstances and timelines, Ifemelu's and Jane's immigrant journeys are multiple and multidirectional, flexible and global.

This geographic flexibility is both promising and risky. Being an immigrant in a new place can offer an opportunity for growth or reinvention, but it can also prove disruptive and even destructive. Both novels emphasize how profoundly immigration influences coming of age, particularly as Ifemelu and Jane each feel at times starkly limited by their ethnic backgrounds and status as immigrants. Perhaps *because* of these experiences of outsiderness and exclusion, empowered decision-making becomes central to each protagonist's personal development. In spite of the ways that both women have felt stifled or broken down, by the end of these novels, Ifemelu and Jane feel free to make choices for themselves—about where they live, what they do, and whom they love.

This focus on empowered decision-making is seen most clearly in both authors' revision of the genre's conventional endings. Ifemelu, by any measure, achieves the "rags to riches" American Dream: though she struggles to pay her rent and buy food when she arrives in the US, she pursues her passion for blogging, earns a lot of money doing so, is hired at Princeton, becomes part of the elite intellectual class, and buys a home. She recognizes her success and yet she feels unfulfilled, weighed down by "cement in her soul" (7). Adichie shows here that success and the American Dream do not have to be "enough"—and so Ifemelu gives up this stability to return to Nigeria. Similarly, Jane longs for love, and her decision to leave Korea stems in part from the hope that she might reunite with Ed—which she does. Yet when Ed wants to commit to her, Jane ends the relationship because she feels limited by it. Both *Americanah* and *Re Jane* thus raise the possibility of traditional "happy endings," but intentionally disrupt or *write beyond* them to avoid a too-tidy closure. Through these narrative revisions, Adichie and Park, like

Eugenides and Choi, suggest that individual fulfillment and authenticity are the most desired outcomes of coming of age today. This is a departure from the genre's traditional celebration of the relinquishment of one's personal desires in order to become a productive member of society, which for female protagonists has typically meant becoming a wife and mother. Adichie and Park show that women do not need to wholly reject romance for the sake of this independence, however. At the end of the novel, Jane, finally comfortable with herself, is about to be set up by a friend; Ifemelu, similarly, is ready to open the door for Obinze because she has now realized that she can exist without him. Because of the agency and sense of opportunity that both protagonists feel, *writing beyond the ending* can now include romance.

At the beginning of this chapter, I announced mutual transformation as its theme. And indeed, just as Ifemelu and Jane are greatly affected by their geographic movements and choices, the American bildungsroman is also richly expanded by stories with immigrant protagonists. Gilbert H. Muller argues that this kind of literary diversity actually updates the epic of America, observing that "Ethnic and racial difference in the immigrant fiction . . . alters America's grand narrative by bringing marginalized groups into contact with American culture in such a way that the specific features of these groups become a distinctive aspect of postmodern life" (18). These literary interactions have a particularly powerful significance in our current climate of social and political hostility: Donald Trump was elected president after promising in his campaign to call for "a total and complete shutdown" of Muslim immigration and to build a wall between Mexico and the US—and he has taken to steps to try to enact these xenophobic policies

in just his first weeks in office (J. Johnson). Moreover, last year, *thirty-one* state governors tried to defy President Obama's order to take in refugees fleeing violence in Syria (Fantz and Brumfeld). Literature depicting "the American subject" as racially, ethnically, and internationally diverse helps to give faces, names, and voices to these immigrants, and it more richly represents the wide-ranging experiences of female coming of age in the United States.

Chapter 3: The Invisible Americans—
Poverty & Identity in *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone*

"I got two little brothers who can't feed theirselves…Pretty soon the laws're takin' our house away n'throwin' us out…to live in the fields…*like dogs*." —Ree, *Winter's Bone*

"You ever tasted dog food?"
"*We ain't no dogs*."—Skeetah and Randall, *Salvage the Bones*

To live in deep poverty is to live on the edge between civilization and wildness, at risk of feeling less than human. In this state, attention is fixated on the present moment, on meeting the immediate needs at the foundation of Maslow's hierarchy: food, shelter, bodily safety. Life is about persisting, trudging forward, and surviving—not climbing upward. Yet the upward climb has long been a focus of the bildungsroman genre. Traditionally, the bildungsroman has oriented the coming-of-age process toward either class mobility (for poor and middle-class protagonists), or self-actualization and societal integration (for upper-class protagonists). But what does bildung mean in a context of such deep poverty that even surviving to adulthood seems uncertain? In conditions so desperate that one feels invisible to society? When class mobility seems utterly impossible? In such poverty, what conception of the future can bildung be oriented towards?

These are the questions explored in Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award-winning *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006). Both novels follow teenage protagonists through a brief narrative time period as they struggle with an immediate crisis for survival. Both teens have been growing up in deep poverty,

and their environments are shaped by parental absence, substance abuse, and material deprivation. Their souls and even their physical bodies bear the evidence of this neglect. Invisible to larger society, the protagonists' off-the-grid communities run on their own codes of conduct and systems of justice. The conditions of deprivation in which these protagonists live have profound effects on their coming-of-age processes, and these distinctive features of deep-poverty bildung are the subject of this chapter. I analyze how these novels depict coming of age within conditions of deprivation, and I interrogate the visible and invisible ways that the young female protagonists' quotidian experiences and sense of the future are shaped by growing up in abjectly impoverished environments. Moreover, I consider what possibilities these bildungsromane suggest for personal growth and direction in environments of inescapable poverty.

Social class has traditionally been a focus of the bildungsroman genre. In classic texts like *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the upper-class heroes' privileged backgrounds allow them to follow a more exploratory, meandering path to maturation. Financial means enable Wilhelm to take up with a traveling theatre troupe, Emma to try her hand at matchmaking, and Hans Castorp to extend his stay in a sanatorium to chase love and a sense of purpose. For these protagonists, the endpoint of bildung is personal fulfillment and a sense of clarity as to one's rightful place in society. For many middle-class protagonists, the goal that drives the bildungsroman narrative is upward mobility. Such is particularly the case for subjects whose families encounter financial difficulties and social decline, like David Copperfield, Frédéric Moreau, and Maggie Tulliver. According

to Franco Moretti, this emphasis on class fluidity is precisely why the genre has a "fondness for middle-class heroes." Such middle-class protagonists, Moretti says, are uniquely positioned to move up and down the social ladder: while "conditions of extreme wealth and extreme poverty tend to change slowly . . . 'in the middle' anything can happen" (248, note 5).[51]

As Moretti notes, class ascension from deep poverty, as unlikely as it may be, does make for a dramatic narrative. So, in another subset of the bildungsroman, we find the "rags to riches" story, which follows a protagonist from humble beginnings to unexpected wealth. Jane Eyre and Pip, for example, are both born into poverty, then experience a change in fortunes. Pip becomes the protégé of a wealthy benefactor, and Jane receives a surprise inheritance and marries into the upper class. Christine DeVine observes that when these Victorian bildungsroman protagonists advance to a higher social standing, the new position is presented as their "rightful" place; social class becomes equated with personal value. Although Pip "may get his comeuppance for being a snobbish prig," she says, "he still does not belong back at the forge" (DeVine 125). Jane's class ascension can be similarly understood as her rightful reward for being a good, moral person. By the same token, the European bildungsroman tradition has also shown that continued poverty is often unlivable: protagonists who are poor into

[51] The slow climb of progress proves especially true in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Though Jude Fawley had scholarly dreams far beyond his low-class station, he finds, in the end, that he did not have enough time to realize them, and he dies a pauper and a pariah. After a series of disappointments and deep tragedies, Jude recalls the scope of his early ambition, realizing that the deck was simply too stacked against him for him to achieve such lofty goals: "It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one; and my impulses—affections—vices perhaps they should be called—were too strong not to hamper a man without advantages; who should be as cold-blooded as a fish and as selfish as a pig to have a really good chance of being one of his country's worthies" (246).

adulthood often die by the narrative's end. This proves true for what we might call "rags to rags" protagonists like Jude Fawley or "riches to rags" subjects like Maggie Tulliver.

In the US, where the bildungsroman genre has historically featured more diverse protagonists, authors have demonstrated an even deeper interest in the role of class in identity formation. Subjects of the American bildungsroman come from across the class spectrum. Some protagonists reject or do not experience class mobility: the low-born Huck Finn resists being "civilized," while the privileged Holden Caulfield carries his disillusionment with the world from one elite prep school to another. But more commonly, the American bildungsroman tradition has been concerned with working-class or poor protagonists whose coming of age is oriented toward achievement of a higher place in the class structure. For example, in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), young Mick Kelly dreams of escaping her impoverished upbringing for a worldly life of travel and music. At the end of Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), Francie is leaving the hard tenement life for college, finally realizing her dream of education. Other twentieth-century bildungsromane explore how class shapes the bildung of immigrant and minority protagonists. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) highlight the economic hardships and ethnic and class-based discrimination faced by new immigrant and first-generation families. Meanwhile, mid-century texts about black identity formation, like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) capture the intersection of class, identity, and racism.

In the US bildungsroman, class status and dreams of upward mobility are most commonly represented through a protagonist's physical environment (particularly housing or geographic location) and profession. These markers are often deeply intertwined. Selina's mother in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for instance, works feverishly at a factory job and pins all her dreams on buying a Brooklyn brownstone; Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* (1984) believes that leaving her dilapidated neighborhood will launch her adult success as a writer, and Lucy in *Lucy* (1990) dreams that reaching the United States will free her from the repression and unhappiness she felt at home in colonial Antigua. Because home environment often outwardly marks one's social class, a protagonist's move to a new country, new neighborhood, or new dwelling can seem to offer a concrete, identifiable way to improve his or her class position, especially in the eyes of others.

For the protagonists studied in the previous chapters, class ascension is figured as career advancement, with higher education generally a required antecedent. Regina and Ifemelu become famous writers, and Jane (like her model) receives an unexpected inheritance and launches a successful small business. The rise in social class is particularly dramatic for Jane and Ifemelu. Jane had previously felt her working-class, immigrant background limited her personal and social development, and Ifemelu, upon first entering the US, experienced a period of devastating poverty that overwhelmed her goals and identity. Still, both women's fortunes ultimately change, and they build impressive careers that they find fulfilling. Significantly, each woman uses her increased wealth to purchase a home, laying down roots to help secure her new position. In *The*

Marriage Plot, Madeleine is born into privilege and expects to stay there, but her personal development also hinges on finding an "appropriate" career path. Entering a doctoral program to become a literary scholar helps her feel that she is successfully finding her way, especially after her marriage crumbles. In her case, we see how in the US, professional success is key not only to class mobility, but also to class stability. In the end, all four protagonists—Madeleine, Regina, Jane, and Ifemelu—gain knowledge and experience, cope with losses, and feel a new sense of personal empowerment, and the open, forward-looking endings of all four texts suggest that each woman possesses a new hopefulness about her future and continued development. This growth is represented, in large part, by their finding desirable professional paths.

In the US, these two avenues for class mobility—freedom to change environments and attainment of professional success—are assumed, or at least hoped, to be universally accessible. American cultural narratives about childhood and personal development suggest that all children, regardless of the circumstances into which they are born, have a "right to childhood"—words spoken by social reform activist Florence Kelley more than a century ago (3). Kelley urged Americans to treat childhood as a period to be "long-cherished" and "carefully nurtured" (3), echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's eighteenth-century theory that "Nature wants children to be children before being men" (90). According to the national narrative, every young American should be able to grow up to be whoever and whatever he or she wants to be, so long as they work hard. These beliefs inform not only US cultural narratives, but also our legislation and policy, including child labor laws that keep children out of the workplace, a free public education system

designed to give all children the chance to learn, and social welfare programs like WIC and Head Start that support children's health and development. Yet despite the idealistic narrative and government programming, the number of Americans living in poverty remains startlingly high, with people of color affected disproportionately.[52] According to the US Census Bureau's 2015 report, 13.5 percent of the US population was living in poverty at that time (Proctor et al 18). Nearly half in that group—more than nineteen million people—are living in "deep poverty," or with an income of less than half the national poverty threshold.[53] More than six million of those living in deep poverty are children.[54] For these young Americans, the promise of a nurtured childhood and a merit-based ladder of opportunity often goes unfulfilled, in large part because of what historian John Michael calls our nation's "legacy of exclusion, oppression, and disenfranchisement" along gendered, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic lines (3). It is undeniable that America's dominant ideology of the "right to childhood" is belied by the experiences of children living in deep poverty. These children often grow up and spend all their lives with limited access to opportunities for education, training, work, and comfortable housing. That is, they lack real access to class mobility. What does coming of age look like in these circumstances?

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[52] Poverty is also often cyclical: children born into poverty are likely to stay there. For more on the multigenerational impact of poverty, see Tom Zeller Jr.'s "For America's Least Fortunate, The Grip Of Poverty Spans Generations."

[53] This means that a family with two adults and two children would have a household income of $12,018 or less ("What is Deep Poverty?").

[54] In *Identity and the Failure of America*, Michael points out the discrepancy in national ideology and reality: "In discourse, at least, the United States remains the land of opportunity, the home of the free, the world's greatest democracy. In reality, the history and legacy of exclusion, oppression, and disenfranchisement of blacks, women, and the poor indicate the nation's failure to fulfill its promises. The peculiarity of identity in the United States emerges in the contestations between those prescribed identities, the injustices they have borne, and a national identity promising justice to all" (3).

Winter's Bone and *Salvage the Bones* offer two representations of bildung in deep poverty. The poverty in these novels is not the poverty of the rags-to-riches narrative, readily transcended through skill, virtue, or good fortune. Rather, it is a deep, often unnoticed rural poverty that is depicted as essentially insurmountable. To survive in these environments of deprivation requires difficult compromises, aid from others, and simple luck. In *Salvage the Bones*, fifteen-year-old Esch is a poor and pregnant black teen living in the Mississippi bayou while Hurricane Katrina lurks. In *Winter's Bone*, sixteen-year-old Ree lives in even greater destitution deep in the Ozark Mountains, where she is desperate to save her family from homelessness after her father disappears on bond. Other recent bildungsromane also explore identity formation and tough choices in rural poverty, including Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007), Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011), Bonnie Jo Campbell's *Once Upon a River* (2011), and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* (2014).

For both Esch and Ree, poverty seems not an obstacle to overcome, but rather a sentence or condition to be survived. They have been deeply poor since birth, and life has left them little room to imagine that they might grow up to find adult life any easier. Esch and Ree spend their youth worrying about having enough food to eat, keeping a roof over their heads, and caring for their siblings. Unlike Ifemelu and Jane, who ultimately overcome the challenges they face as minorities and immigrants and gain professional success through intelligence, patience, and lucky breaks, these protagonists in deep poverty have little opportunity even to *hope* that they will eventually pursue their dreams and make empowered choices. Esch does not seem to have any goals for her future, and

her unintended pregnancy makes it even more difficult for her to imagine the future at all. Though she feels a real connection with literature, like Madeleine and Regina, she cannot envision college as a possibility. Instead, Esch's only desire is for connection: to be loved by the man who impregnates her but makes clear he does not care for her. Ree does have a slightly more concrete vision of an alternate future—a long-held, vague dream of joining the Army, where she can live in an orderly, stable structure far from her local environment—but as a high school dropout who is the family's primary caretaker, she understands that her military dream is a long shot. Esch's and Ree's weak aspirations for future success contrast with the genre's traditional focus on class ascension, and with the more expansive sense of opportunity felt by many female protagonists today, including all four women in the previous chapters. In this way, Ward and Woodrell question the national mythos of success, opportunity, and achievement, and their novels make plain that the bildungsroman is often a genre of fantasy.

Both authors represent their protagonists' limited view of the future through form, specifically by employing very short, compressed narrative timeframes and a "real time" narrative. *Salvage the Bones* takes place over twelve days, and *Winter's Bone* over the course of about a week. By contrast, the bildungsromane in the previous chapters have narrative timespans ranging from a couple of years (*The Marriage Plot*, *Re Jane*) to more than a decade (*My Education, Americanah*). The short timelines in Esch's and Ree's narratives are fitting, given that they are living on the edge of survival and under a constant pressure that focuses their attention on the barest necessities. This pressure on the present is further emphasized through a "real time" or "of the moment" narrative

style. The reader experiences Esch's and Ree's lives at a micro-level—individual meals, daily worries, and fitful nights of sleep. Given the genre's traditional emphasis on a protagonist's development over time, a sustained narrative focus at this level is unusual. Bildungsromane typically feature at least some degree of narrative distance, often through a conclusion that jumps forward in time—as when we learn at the end of *Jane Eyre* that Jane has been married for ten years by the time she narrates her story, or when we realize that Holden Caulfield is narrating his few days' adventures from a hospital room after one year. By contrast, Ward and Woodrell revise this bildungsroman convention to represent Esch's and Ree's foreshortened views of the future. Amidst the instability and unpredictability of their lives, both young women find it difficult to plan, dream, and hope; instead, they try to get through each day.

The protagonists' youth also emphasizes the gravity of their daily concerns and the insecurity of their adult futures. At fifteen and sixteen, respectively, Esch and Ree are much younger than the protagonists in the previous four novels in this study. As I have shown, authors today increasingly focus on the developmental experiences of legal adulthood. Contemporary bildungsromane that do feature a youthful subject are often narrated by an older protagonist looking backwards, as we see in *Prep* (2005), *Girl in Translation* (2010), *The Round House* (2012), and *The Goldfinch* (2013). Yet Ward and Woodrell depart from this common practice by leaving their protagonists as teens. The effect is to emphasize the fragility of Esch's and Ree's bildung by denying us any glimpse into their lives in the future. Adulthood for Esch and Ree is not a guarantee but an "if." Against our cultural belief in the "right" to childhood and the period's

significance in human development, their younger ages, premature responsibilities, and limited future options serve to underscore the ways in which they have been denied care, security, and room for personal growth.

Both authors also dramatize the materiality of deep poverty to show its profound, wide-ranging effects on individuals. In environments of deprivation, "things" take on great power, and Esch's and Ree's lives are dramatically affected by, among other things, cars that will not start and cupboards that are bare. Ward and Woodrell draw attention to material goods, cataloguing each girl's belongings and especially, the items that she lacks. Both authors also illustrate poverty's impact on the girls' bodies, just barely beyond puberty, and detail Esch's and Ree's corporeal responses to hunger, pain, and desire. Both authors also focus on the femaleness of the young women's bodies to reveal the ways in which their sex makes them particularly vulnerable to poverty's devastation.

In this chapter, I examine how the authors depict poverty's far-reaching effects on young female identity formation, concentrating on three sites of analysis: the novels' form, specifically their compressed narrative structures and "real time" narrative style; the protagonists' young ages but adult concerns; and the narrative attention to material goods and the girls' bodies. Because poverty so forcefully limits Esch's and Ree's lives, including their sense of the future, *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* serve as counter-narratives to the texts of the previous chapters, where protagonists' opportunities ultimately seemed wide open. Yet, despite the crushing challenges in Esch's and Ree's lives, both novels also recapitulate the genre in key ways. Thus, this chapter explores not only how Esch's and Ree's bildung is limited by poverty, but also the ways in which both

young women *do* develop and learn about themselves. Resourcefully, both Esch and Ree find ways to fulfill their unmet needs. This often means relying heavily on sibling bonds or very close friendships; family and community relationships prove far more significant for both girls than for the protagonists of the previous chapters. This is in part because the girls are still minors, and in part because they are so poor: despite their individual resilience, they must rely on the aid of others. Seeking out connection, both young women also explore their sexuality and fall in love. Though Esch and Ree never expect material improvement in the conditions of their lives, both young women still learn about themselves and their own priorities and desires. The bildung we see in these novels is an exercise in carving out fulfillment and purpose within a difficult environment. These efforts ultimately result in a somewhat more hopeful view of the future for each young woman by the narrative's close.

Despite the common threads in *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone*, their protagonists have an important difference: their race. While Ree is a rural white teen, Esch is a black teen in the South, growing up with a particular set of inherited burdens that undoubtedly shape her sense of her place in the world. Recent sociological research has highlighted how poverty affects black Americans even more severely than white ones. In a 2016 article for *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that "black poverty proves itself to be 'fundamentally distinct' from white poverty" in part because of its uneven social ramifications; blacks living in poverty, for instance, are far more likely to drop out of high school, and they face staggeringly higher incarceration rates than

impoverished whites.[55] In *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide* (2006), authors Meizhu Lui et al. underscore the relationship between poverty and the nation's legacy of racism with this startling fact: "For every dollar owned by the average white family in the United States, the average family of color has less than one dime" (1).

As I discuss in the previous chapter, recent bildungsroman scholarship has fruitfully concentrated on representations of ethnic and minority bildung. Some scholars, like Kester and LeSeur, argue for distinct generic subcategories to honor the particularities of the black coming-of-age experience. Others, like Bolaki, Feng, and Japtok use a wider, comparative lens to look at ethnicity in the bildungsroman more broadly. Drawing insights from these scholars, particularly Japtok's cross-cultural approach and Bolaki's and Feng's explorations of the links between ethnic group dynamics, hardship, and identity, I use a socioeconomic lens. I examine the experiences of a black teen growing up in deep poverty alongside the experiences of a white teen growing up in deep poverty, exploring how conditions of deprivation affect both girls' coming of age and selfhood. Despite this comparative approach, I am in no way suggesting a "colorblind" reading, as I also interrogate the "blackness" of Esch's bildung experience and the intersecting, racist forces that contribute to her family's poverty. But I believe that examining *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* through the lens of social

[55] Coates points out that the "incarceration rate in the most afflicted black neighborhood is 40 times worse than the incarceration rate in the most afflicted white neighborhood." In another example of poverty's disproportionate impact on the black community, Paul Kiel highlights how low-income families are more dramatically affected by small financial setbacks: "About one-quarter of African-American families had less than $5 in reserve. Low-income whites had about $375." Kiel says that the differences in savings exist "for largely historical reasons rooted in racism."

class illuminates the complex ways that gender, race, poverty, and opportunity can interact in the identity formation process. Most significantly, this focus on class reveals that the condition of deep poverty can engender a shared sense of deprivation across racial or ethnic lines; to borrow a concept from transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, poverty produces *a common context of struggle* for these protagonists (7).[56] Growing up very poor shapes how Esch and Ree view themselves and the world, just as being an immigrant, being queer, or being a person of color can inform one's perspective. Indeed, striking similarities in Esch's and Ree's experiences challenge LeSeur's rigid generic distinctions by suggesting that growing up in deep poverty can produce similar feelings of neglect and invisibility for these black and white protagonists.

Ultimately, these protagonists' development is manifested as a modest broadening of perspective: each young woman moves away from an oppressively foreshortened view of her future to a (modestly) more expansive sense of possibility. Significantly, like the four novels of the previous chapters, *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* have endings that are open-ended and forward-looking. Even on the heels of great trauma—Hurricane Katrina razes Esch's community, and Ree's father is murdered—both endings are tinged with a tentative hopefulness. This unexpected hope arises from each girl's newfound opportunity to see a bit further ahead than before, to imagine the future and a place for herself within it. Esch finds herself newly able to envision motherhood, and she picks out

[56] Mohanty uses this concept to highlight how the shared hardships of racial and ethnic alterity can produce a powerful political unity among women of color. In the introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, she describes: "what seems to constitute 'women of color' or 'third world women' as a viable oppositional alliance is *a common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications" (7). I extend the "context" of this struggle to capture the daily fight to survive in deep poverty.

names for her baby. Ree receives some unexpected money and pictures herself buying a car and getting a job. In these endings, it is the very unexpectedness of the sources of hope that demonstrate most powerfully the authors' impulse toward open endings. If hope can spring up at any time, then the future may offer new possibilities for ongoing development. Yet, poignantly, what qualifies as hopeful for these protagonists is meager compared to the bright, unlimited futures of protagonists in the previous chapters. This fact further underscores the profound effects of deep poverty at every stage of development, and it illuminates the enduring and dramatic inequity in American experiences of coming of age.

Salvage the Bones—Loss, Stopgaps, and the Winds of Wreckage

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* begins with a crisis: Esch, a fifteen-year-old black teen living in deep poverty on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, learns she is pregnant. The father of her unborn child is Manny, a young man she loves but who makes clear that he views her only as an accessible body. So, Esch tells no one: she has no one to turn to and no resources to seek out. Her own mother died in childbirth years earlier, taking with her all traces of parental care in Esch's life. Her alcoholic father, "Daddy," is neglectful and occasionally violent, and so Esch and her teenage brothers, Randall and Skeetah, have essentially raised themselves and their seven-year-old younger brother, Junior. The narrative is told from Esch's first-person perspective in a brief timeframe of just twelve days, and the intimacy of Esch's narrative voice reveals how her personal development is shaped by deep poverty, neglect, and a strong desire to be seen and noticed. Esch's

pregnancy is not the only crisis in this short period: Hurricane Katrina roars through the town, forcing Esch to confront both her pregnancy and her father, and catalyzing changes in her sense of herself.

Kiese Laymon has called Ward "the greatest American storyteller of my generation," and similarly, *Washington Post* critic Ron Charles observes that *Salvage the Bones* "has the aura of a classic about it." Indeed, there is something timeless or classical about Ward's narrative, despite its 2005 setting. Recent scholarship on the novel has thus focused on its resonances with other classic American texts. In a 2016 article for *Studies in the Novel,* Sinéad Moynihan highlights the connections between *Salvage the Bones* and *As I Lay Dying,* and in a recent piece in the *Steinbeck Review,* Brian Railsback emphasizes the relationship between Ward's novel and *The Grapes of Wrath.* Deep poverty, it seems, is what makes this novel feel so outside of time. For instance, while the state of the tech industry affects Jane Re's job prospects after college, no one in Esch's immediate world has a computer. Instead, her community is often excluded from the technological, financial, and national present.

Poverty is indeed *the* condition of Esch's daily life. While I focus primarily on Esch's physical poverty in this chapter, this poverty cannot be divorced from the multiple oppressions that contribute to it, particularly the United States' dark history of slavery and its enduring widespread racism. While my comparative analysis of *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* will reveal what I believe to be striking commonalties in the quotidian experiences of deep poverty that extend beyond racial lines, it is important to recognize the ways in which Esch's experience in poverty is shaped by her blackness.

The intersectional relationship between race, class, history, and poverty is reflected in Esch's physical surroundings—even the home in which she grows up. She and her family live in "the Pit," family land that Esch describes as a "trash-strewn, hardscrabble" place (94). When Esch's grandfather first bought the land, he "let the white men he work[ed] with dig for clay" (14). But their digging disturbed the landscape, unnaturally creating a pond that he worried would "gobble up the property" (14). The Pit's name and history of damage by white hands recalls "the Bottom," the poor, black neighborhood of Toni Morrison's *Sula,* another text that explores female coming of age in rural black poverty. The Bottom's origins go back to slavery, as the neighborhood was formed when a freed slave moved to the land after being promised it was the fertile ground owed to him by his former owner. But his ex-owner tricked him, and the man finds that the terrain in the Bottom is hilly and hostile, its winds brutal, and the planting "backbreaking" (5). In the end, all the seeds "washed away" and nothing could grow (5). Life is similarly challenging in the Pit: it is a place where, as Esch describes, everything is "starving, fighting, struggling" (94).

Ward sets her novel in the town of Bois Sauvage, which is divided along racial lines into "Black Bois" and "White Bois." Esch learns from a teacher that the schools in Bois Sauvage were not desegregated until 1969, when a major hurricane left people simply "too tired [of] finding their relatives' uprooted bodies . . . [and] sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses . . . to still fight the law outlawing segregation" (140). Plagued by neglect, Black Bois is unnoticed by greater society and seemingly on the edge of civilization. The town's state of physical ruin

inflects Esch's sense of her own value, something we can hear in her description of the town's single park. She says the park is designed "to impose some order, some civility to Bois. It fails" (117). The park sits neglected for 364 days out of each year, until the annual visit of "county convicts in green-and-white striped jumpsuits" who "halfheartedly try to trim back the encroaching wood, mow the grass set to bloom" (117). The inmates' infrequent, perfunctory work in tending the place is their punishment, not an act of care and support for the community. Esch reflects, "The wild things of Bois Sauvage ignore them; we are left to seed another year" (117). Through Esch's use of the pronoun "we" to identify the town's residents with the park's overgrown landscape, Ward shows how the neglect of a place can make citizens feel similarly forgotten and out of control.

The residents also receive other messages from the state that they are unworthy of care and attention. For instance, news reports about the neighborhood are often incorrect: as Manny notes, "Every time someone in Bois Sauvage get arrested, they always get the story wrong" (6). It is for this reason that Esch and her siblings mistrust weather reports that warn of Hurricane Katrina, and why there do not appear to be any efforts to help residents evacuate. The absence of state attention is most conspicuous after Katrina demolishes the neighborhood. In the aftermath, Esch observes: "People stand in clusters at what used to be intersections, the street signs vanished, all they own in a plastic bag at their feet, waiting for someone to pick them up. No one is coming" (250). The scene helps to illustrate why Esch grows up understanding that the world at large views her life as less important than others', even in times of life-threatening crisis. Critic Carolyn

Steedman's reflections on her own experience receiving state aid as a child in England can help us understand the significance of this absence for Esch. In *Landscape for a Good Woman,* Steedman shares how state welfare profoundly benefited her own developing identity:

> I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinner at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something. My inheritance from those years is the belief (maintained always with some difficulty) that I do have a right to the earth (122).

But Esch, her siblings, and the rest of their community receive no such message from the state.

Through attention to material goods and to Esch's physical body, Ward illustrates the stresses of deep poverty and their dampening effect on Esch's development and her sense of the options available to her. Food takes on a great significance in poverty, and Ward emphasizes this by frequently taking stock of what the family has and lacks. Usually, the family's food supply is limited to canned meats, potatoes, and Top Ramen noodle packets. But as Hurricane Katrina looms, the children grow worried about going hungry after the storm. They take out every can from the cupboard and inventory all the food they have to their name, counting: "*twenty-four* cans of peas, *five* cans of potted meat, *one* can of tomato paste, *six* cans of soup, *four* cans of sardines, *one* can of corn, *five* cans of tuna fish, *one* box of saltine crackers, *some* cornflakes we could eat without milk. . . . *thirty-five* Top Ramen noodle packs" (194, emphasis added). Esch and her brothers recognize that this food will run out quickly for their family of five, and they are

concerned. Skeetah wonders aloud whether they will have to eat dog food once the canned goods are gone, to which Randall snaps back, "We ain't no dogs. And you ain't either" (193). For these near-parentless children with a dwindling food supply, the threat of hunger is a threat of dehumanization.

The family's poverty is so profound as to render all of their property communal. Esch does not even have her own women's clothing; instead, she wears "mostly men's T-shirts . . . loose jeans and cotton shorts" from the pool of clothing items the family shares (88). In contrast to Madeline, who plays with her identity through clothing choices in *The Marriage Plot*, and Jane, who cultivates a new image with high heels and makeup in *Re Jane*, Esch simply wears what is available to her. With the blandest of adjectives—*men's*, *loose*, *cotton*—Ward shows that in the impoverished Pit, even clothing is oversized and nondescript. Not insignificantly, these baggy men's clothing items conceal Esch's sex, and they allow her to physically hide her pregnancy from her family.

The femaleness of Esch's body becomes one more site for the stresses and deprivations of poverty. Sometimes Esch is so tired of potted meats and packaged noodles that she cannot eat much, and this causes her period to become irregular. Inadequate nutrition interrupts her female body's reproductive cycle, literally discouraging her development into womanhood. But the most dramatic material imprint of poverty on Esch's body is when she becomes pregnant at age fifteen. The news immediately devastates her; upon seeing the positive test result, she refers to her pregnancy as "the terrible truth of what I am" (36). Although Esch's partners regularly used condoms, she has never taken birth control because she lacked money and access.

She explains, “I’ve never had a prescription, wouldn’t have money to get them if I did, don’t have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department. Who would bring me?” (102). Again, items that Esch physically lacks take on great significance in her life. For Ward, the unavailability of birth control represents Esch’s lack of access to healthcare, and the unavailability of cars and rides illustrate her literal and figurative immobility. Esch does not even have enough money to confirm her pregnancy; when she worries she is pregnant, she has to steal a pregnancy test from the grocery store in order to confirm her suspicion.

In her study of repressed memories in the bildungsromane of Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, Feng argues that “ethnic women writers strive for textual ‘recognition’ by exposing the *marks* of repression and oppression on their characters” (20). Feng points to narrative descriptions of the physical scars of fictional slave women as a clear illustration of this practice. She suggests that these scars become “visual ‘texts’” that expose the characters’ suffering to readers (20). Understood this way, Esch’s irregular periods from nutritional deficiency and her pregnancy from lacking birth control are clear marks of the “repression and oppression” of her life in poverty (20).

Just as poverty contributes to Esch’s becoming pregnant, it also prevents her from terminating the unwanted pregnancy. Esch knows she cannot afford an abortion, so desperate, she recalls other options for ending a pregnancy that she has heard in the school hallways: taking a month’s worth of birth control, drinking bleach, or injuring oneself with blunt force. She considers these ideas seriously enough to explore their feasibility, noting that though she could not find birth control, there is “bleach in the

laundry room" and an old washing machine sitting in the yard that might be "big enough and hard enough" to throw herself against (102). Ward's attention to materiality is again important here. Esch is not asking herself whether she is sure she wants to terminate the pregnancy or questioning the morality of abortion; instead, she is focused on surveying the goods in the house to see whether she owns any of the materials she has heard of others using to end their pregnancies. She ultimately determines that her options "narrow to none" (103). A small amount of money could safely prevent Esch from becoming a mother at age fifteen, but she simply does not have it. To live in deep poverty is also to have important, life-altering decisions taken out of your hands.

While material goods provide concrete evidence of the effects of deep poverty on Esch's coming of age and sense of possibility, she also lives with a more abstract sort of neglect: a dearth of parental care and affection. Her mother died when Esch was eight, and this loss has a heavy influence on her daily life and development. "Mama" is described as having been full of love and physical tenderness, and her death divides Esch's life into two epochs: with Mama and without Mama, with parental care and without it.

Though this parental *loss* is ever-present in Esch's life, bildungsromane rarely depict close, *ongoing* relationships between parents and coming-of-age subjects. The loss of a parent, though, remains a longstanding trope of the genre, enduring even in coming-of-age texts today. In many works, a deceased parent takes on a powerful posthumous influence, and the protagonist's grief becomes what Judith Butler calls an "animating absence in the presence" (468). We see this dynamic in recent bildungsromane like *The*

Secret Life of Bees (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), and *Swamplandia!* (2011). In these texts, as in *Salvage the Bones,* a parent dies before the narrative starting point, and then both plot and the protagonist's identity formation revolve in some way around this loss. Interestingly, these examples all feature bildungsromane with adolescent protagonists. Parental loss seems to have a far more disruptive effect on identity for younger protagonists than for the legal adult subjects of *weiterbildungsromane*. Naturally, such a loss would be more conspicuous on a daily basis for a younger protagonist than for one already living outside of the house. (Esch mentions "Mama" more than 90 times, whereas in *My Education*, Regina's deceased father is referenced only nine times, and mostly by her mother.) Everyday sights and smells constantly bring Mama to the front of Esch's consciousness, reminding her that everything might be better if Mama were still alive. In childhood and adolescence, traditional periods of forward growth, grief constantly casts Esch's view backwards into the past.

Indeed, Esch's identity as a child was swiftly demolished when her mother died, denying her and her siblings their "right" to a childhood. They are forced to mature by their grief and by their new caretaker roles. After Mama's death, Daddy does not redouble his parenting efforts but instead reassigns all household and parenting tasks to his children. He teaches Esch and Randall, then aged eight and ten, to fix their newborn brother's bottles, coax him to sleep, and do the wash. Ward's description of their new tasks highlights their physical smallness, drawing attention to how young they are for these responsibilities: "This is how we hung the sheets in the beginning, when we were

both too short to put them over the line: the wet sheet sagging in the middle, us counting and lifting and flinging the damp cotton at the same time hoping it would catch" (179). Nursing his own grief over losing his wife, Daddy is unable or unwilling to see his offspring as the young, needy children they are. By the time of the narrative, the children have been parenting themselves and each other for so long that as Daddy gathers supplies for the impending hurricane, Randall actually has to remind him that he and his siblings are still physically developing. Worried about how little food they have, he pleads with his father: "Everybody still growing, Daddy. Esch, Junior, me. Even Skeet. We all hungry" (195).

Ward presents parental neglect and mistreatment as yet another byproduct of deep poverty. Besides assigning his children adult responsibilities, Daddy also rebukes them anytime they express pain or emotion, and he is sometimes violent and demeaning. When one of the children would skin a knee, for instance, Daddy "would roll his eyes" at their tears and "tell us to *stop*. *Stop*" (63). He also rebuked his children for crying over their mother's death. Esch explains how she trained herself to hide her pain:

> After Mama died, Daddy said, *What are you crying for? Stop crying. Crying ain't going to change anything.* We never stopped crying. We just did it quieter. We hid it. I learned how to cry so that almost no tears leaked out of my eyes, so that I swallowed the hot salty water of them and felt them running down my throat. This was the only thing that we could do. (206)

Ward again uses Esch's physical body to illustrate the emotional consequences of childhood neglect; Esch learns to literally swallow her feelings. At other times, Daddy's

mistreatment of his children is physical. During a fight with Skeetah, Daddy grabs at his son to "pull him to standing and then shove him, probably" (105). Esch explains:

> This is what he does when he wants to manhandle, humiliate; he pulls one of us toward him, shakes, and then shoves us hard backward so that we fall in the dirt. So that we sprawl like toddlers learning to walk: dirt on our faces and our hands, faces wet with crying or mucus, ashamed. (105)

Esch's ability to anticipate Daddy's actions and intentions shows how regularly the children experience this kind of abuse—demeaning, infantilizing treatment that is completely at odds with the adult responsibilities they have had to take on. Daddy sometimes gets angry that his children do not appreciate him, but from Esch's view, she "can't see anything else he ever gave me" aside from the shape of her hands (90). This is a painful realization for a child to make about a parent. Daddy's alcoholism also affects daily life for Esch and her brothers; they learn to recognize his levels of inebriation and adjust their behavior accordingly. Esch knows the specific musk of "his fresh alcohol smell" and can see when he "is hungover. He will be mean" (114). This constant state of alertness produces yet another exhausting pressure in Esch's daily life.

And yet, Esch's home life is not entirely without care and affection. Esch and her brothers find ways to have their personal and emotional needs met in their neglectful environment, providing verbal encouragement and physical closeness for each other. Though bildungsroman protagonists often have siblings, it is rare for them to share such close relationships. Sibling attachment is more commonly seen, as here, in narratives shaped by hardships like poverty and parental death. We see children in these situations

turn to each other in texts like *Housekeeping* (1980), *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and *Swamplandia!* (2011).[57] In *Salvage the Bones*, the siblings' profound closeness is a stopgap measure against the overwhelming loneliness of losing their mother and never really knowing their father. Their instinct to support each other feels essential to their survival. The frequent mention of Mama in the siblings' daily conversations, even seven years after her death, shows how they are united by this shared loss. Butler observes that loss can have "oddly fecund" results, and Esch and her siblings' devotion to each other is indeed a generative effect of their grief and struggle (468). Further, and turning again to DuPlessis, the siblings' relationship can also be understood as a way of *writing beyond the ending* of their depressed existence without Mama. DuPlessis points to "reparenting" and "brother-to-sister bonds" as common narrative strategies that allow female protagonists more options. Through the loving relationships between Esch and her brothers, Ward engages both of these strategies at once.

Unlike their father, Esch and her brothers attend to each other's emotional needs. Sometimes, they do this with words, like when Esch tells an upset Skeetah, "You know I'm here" (41). But more frequently, this support is expressed physically, and Ward's pays careful attention to the siblings' every embrace and touch. The tender physicality they share is particularly striking in contrast to their father's detachment. After all, it was Esch and Randall, not Daddy, who held newborn Junior and "licked his tears," and it

[57] Other narratives explore how a rupture between close siblings can shape a protagonist's development, as seen in recent texts like *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012) and *The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls* (2013).

seems plausible that their father has not even hugged them since Mama's death (91). The siblings fill in for this neglect. When Esch starts vomiting early in her pregnancy, she immediately feels Skeetah's hand on her back. When Skeetah is inconsolable after his dog goes missing, Esch hugs him tightly with arms that "had never been so strong" (238). And in the scene where Esch is at perhaps her most vulnerable—Katrina has razed the neighborhood and she encounters Manny for the first time since his vitriolic response to her pregnancy—the physical connection with her brothers is particularly powerful:

> Manny sat there stiffly . . . still looking at me, at Randall, waiting for a wave, a nod, anything. I slid my fingers into the crook of Randall's elbow, and Junior's leg rubbed the back of my hand. . . . I walked so that Randall was my shield, my warm cover, my brother . . . [H]e squeezed his forearm to his waist, folding my arm into his, pulling me with him. (244)

By using highly physical verbs here like *slid*, *rubbed*, *squeezed*, *folding*, *pulling*, Ward underscores the deliberateness of these touches and the protective, healing nature of the siblings' close connection. I note in the opening to this chapter that *survival* in deep poverty requires focusing on the immediate needs at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy: food, safety, shelter. But as Ward shows, a *life* in deep poverty requires more—love, touch, and connection—the needs of the next rung up in Maslow's ladder (Burton). Esch and her siblings meet this need for each other.

Esch finds another source of connection and identity in the act of sex. She loses her virginity at age twelve to her brother's friend, and she finds her burgeoning sexuality intuitive and, at times, empowering. She reflects, "The only thing that's ever been easy

for me to do, like swimming through the water, was sex when I started having it" (22). Esch feels that her looks and body are unremarkable, but she is distinguished by her sensuality. She describes how boys pursue her for her "pulpy ripe heart. The sticky heart the boys saw through my boyish frame, my dark skin, my plain face" (16). Getting attention because she is a sexually desirable young woman is especially significant to Esch because the Pit is a male-dominated place; she is the only girl among her father, three brothers, and a constant stream of her brothers' friends. And in her men's clothing, Esch even suspects that her father sometimes "forgets" she is a girl (102). Sex becomes a way for Esch to assert a femininity that she feels her body does not show and her family does not recognize. In his review of the novel, Andy Johnson pushes further, arguing that Esch's sexuality "masks a deeper need to be seen, to be recognized for the woman she is becoming" (493). Rather than a mask, however, I view sex as one of Esch's only outlets for visibility at all (however fleeting or shadowed each moment of being "seen" may be).

With Esch's casual, unashamed sexuality, Ward joins other contemporary authors in challenging traditional representations of female sexual experience in stories of female bildung. Like the protagonists in Chapters One and Two, Esch displays a far more relaxed attitude toward sex than female protagonists in the past. While contemporary authors have eschewed the genre's traditional focus on sexual initiation in favor of exploring a protagonist's most significant or fulfilling sexual relationship, Esch's losing her virginity at a young age becomes significant because of its clear *insignificance*. Instead of being momentous or emotionally meaningful for Esch, the encounter simply marks the point when sex became a regular part of her life. Indeed, the real change that

Esch notices after having sex is in how others view her. From that moment on, she says, "the boys always came for me" (27). Sex offers Esch a way to be recognized in an environment where she often feels invisible—to her father, to the state, and later, to Manny. Esch's frankness about her sexual instinct and pleasure also recalls Morrison's Sula Peace. Feng observes that "Sula's sexuality is described as the only medium for her artistic potential in a racist society" (39), and similarly, sex offers an avenue for expression and individuation for Esch. She reflects, "I'd let boys have it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved" (16). In an incredible contrast, sex briefly allows Esch to feel not ignored and unvalued but like a goddess. Like Sula, who could not understand why her best friend Nel was so angry with her for sleeping with her husband (she reasons, "I didn't kill him. I just fucked him"), Esch finds that sex does not need to have meaning beyond its moment (145).

Esch's liberal attitude toward sex also echoes the attitudes of protagonists in the previous chapters, but is different in two key ways. First, she is much younger—Madeleine, Regina, Ifemelu, and Jane are all legal adults, and the past sexual experiences they reference take place when they were in high school or college. Yet Esch began having sex at just twelve, far younger than these other protagonists and younger than the average young women in the US today (who is on average about seventeen, according to the Centers for Disease Control). Considered this way, Esch's early sexual experiences seem to offer another example of how her environment leads her to take on adult behaviors early. Secondly, while Madeleine, Ifemelu, and Regina find that a satisfying sexual relationship makes them feel personally awakened, somehow more fully

themselves, Esch describes her sexual encounters as being focused on her partners. The empowerment the encounters offer her is temporary (she feels like Psyche or Eurydice for just "a moment"), and it does not carry over into other aspects of her life; in no other contexts does she feel special or worthy. This is far different from Madeleine feeling as though Leonard made her more fully alive, her blood finally "all oxygenated and red" (200). Further, Esch's sexual decision-making is colored by passivity and detachment, revealing a more complicated dynamic between her sexuality and her larger identity. Though Esch sometimes finds sex pleasurable, her sexual experiences begin with acquiescence, not desire. She explains, "I'd let boys have [it] because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it" (16). Similarly, though Esch considers sex to be as natural for her as swimming, this instinctiveness is undermined when she shares how she learned to swim: Daddy picked her up and threw her in the water. She had "taken to it fast," but as with sex, Esch felt good at something she did not choose for herself (23). Significantly, both swimming and sex carry serious physical risks.

Though Esch has already had numerous sexual partners, she finds her relationship with Manny to be identity-altering. She reflects, "with Manny, it was different" (16). Ward joins other contemporary bildungsromane authors in depicting how a young woman's most significant sexual relationship is often not her first. With Manny, Esch develops romantic feelings for the first time, and she feels her own sexual desire awaken: she has sex with Manny not out of passivity but hunger, and she stops having sex with anyone else. When other men pursue her, she rejects them, explaining that it feels good to "walk away because it feels like [she is] walking toward Manny" (57). Esch's attachment

to Manny gives her a sense of direction for the first time (indeed, she calls him "the sun"), even though he makes clear that he does not return her feelings (16).

Manny quickly becomes a dangerously powerful metric by which Esch measures her identity and her worth. When he seeks her out for sex, she is buoyed and ecstatic ("He was so beautiful, and still he chose me, again and again"); when he ignores or shuns her, she is devastated ("I have no glory. I have nothing") (16, 123). Their relationship is far from symbiotic: while Esch is devoted to him, Manny lives with his long-term girlfriend and never kisses Esch on the mouth. His expectation of a discreet, solely physical relationship is made clear in a scene when the pair go swimming. Flirting with Esch, Manny grabs her hand underwater and guides it to his penis. But when Esch responds by reaching out to touch his chest, he shows her that she has crossed a line into a greater intimacy that he does not want. He pulls back and chastises her, "What are you doing? . . .You crazy? Naw, Esch. You know it ain't like that" (55-56). Rejected, Esch describes how "the pain comes all at once, like a sudden deluge" (56). Yet despite this humiliation, she continues to want Manny desperately.

Esch's only view of the future revolves around Manny, despite how little encouragement he gives her. In an environment where everything is, in Esch's words, always "starving, fighting, struggling," she decides that Manny and his love offer her only chance of happiness (94). Her desire for Manny even affects how she views her pregnancy; her expectation that it will hurt her chances of being with him contributes to her desire to terminate it. She reflects: "*If I took care of it, he would never know,* I think, *never know, and then maybe it would give him time. Time to what?* I push. *Be*

different. Love me" (102-103). Esch gives Manny power over her identity and self-esteem, pinning on him her desire to be loved, wanted, and most basic of all, simply acknowledged. She repeats over and over that she wants Manny to look her in the eyes, to *see* her. In many ways, Esch's desire recalls Regina's intense longing for Martha to commit to her and publicly acknowledge her as her girlfriend. But as a deeply poor, pregnant teenager, the stakes in Esch's life are much higher.

While Ward uses Esch's radically free attitude toward her sexuality to challenge traditional associations of the female body and sexuality with shame, the fact that Esch faces such a life-altering consequence of her sexuality is utterly traditional.[58] Just as Sula becomes a town pariah for sleeping with white men, Esch's pregnancy is a sort of punishment, making her sexuality public and limiting her already-narrow options for the future. Abel, Hirsch, and Langland observe that female protagonists are almost always punished both for "expressing sexuality" and for "suppressing it" (12). This proves true in *Salvage the Bones*. When Esch tells Manny that she is pregnant with his child, he uses her sexual history against her to deny paternity. He asks angrily, "How you come to me saying something's mines when you fuck everybody who come to the Pit?" When Esch explains that he has been her only partner for months and threatens to tell her brothers on him, Manny rails, "You think they don't know you a slut?" (204). In response, she charges at him, attacking. He shoves her off and leaves her sitting in a ditch, wailing.

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[58] For more on female sexual and bodily shame, see J. Brook Bouson's *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings* (2009) and Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran's *The Female Face of Shame* (2013).

Manny can choose to walk away, but Esch cannot; because she can get pregnant, her female body makes her much more vulnerable.

Esch finds another, somewhat surprising outlet in this environment of deprivation: the stories of Greek mythology. The tales of gods and goddesses, like her close relationships with her siblings and her sexual activity, provide her with a means to process and at times escape the realities of her existence. Esch is introduced to the genre through Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, a summer reading assignment, and she feels a deep, immediate connection to the ancient tales. Esch is particularly drawn to Jason and Medea's tumultuous relationship. Like allusions to Mama, stories of gods and goddesses weave in and out of Esch's narration. These tales provide her with a symbolic framework for trying to understand her experiences, her love, and her pain.

Esch's deep connection with mythology is striking in part because school plays such an insignificant role in her life. As explored in Chapter One, school is a traditional setting for the bildungsroman, and many protagonists, both classical and contemporary, develop a passion for writing or literature that is born in the classroom. But school seems to have no influence on Esch's identity, and intelligence does not factor into her sense of self. Though we learn that Esch "made an A" on the previous summer's reading assignment, no one seems to notice her passionate relationship with literature—quite unlike earlier bildungsromane where protagonists like Jane Eyre or Stephen Dedalus are drawn to books and get recognized by teachers for their intellect, or Elena Ferrante's recent Neapolitan Novels, where protagonist Elena's life path is powerfully shaped by the notice of a teacher (7). Esch not only enjoys mythology, she relates it to her own life. By

giving Esch this unacknowledged facility with literature, Ward connects her to the long bildungsroman tradition. But this connection in turn emphasizes that the notion that a love of literature might be enough to get a poor, bright girl noticed is romantic and unrealistic. Merit does not go as far in Bois Sauvage as it does in other, less deprived places, and Ward shows that intelligence like Esch's can easily go unseen.

Esch sees herself, though, in a mythological context that expands her sense of self and authenticates her feelings. As she reads about Medea, Esch feels immediately connected to her as a woman in love, explaining, "When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by the throat. I can see her" (38). She imagines that her feelings for Manny match "the way Medea felt about Jason when she fell in love . . . that she looked at him and felt a fire eating up through her rib cage, turning her blood to boil" (56-57). Recalling Medea's power also helps Esch when she is in despair. After an earlier instance when Manny violently rejects her, she channels Medea for strength the next time she has to walk near him: "Manny's eyebrows are together, his eyes are big; they almost look sorry. I tell myself I don't care and imagine myself tall as Medea, wearing purple and green robes, bones and gold for jewelry. Even though it feels awkward, I pull my shoulders back when I walk" (170). Her identification with Medea grows only stronger throughout the narrative, and when she attacks Manny for rejecting her and their baby, Esch does not feel she is *like* Medea, but that she *becomes* Medea. Scratching Manny's face while telling him she loves him, she narrates to herself, "This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting" (204). That the vengeful, child-killing Medea is so attractive to Esch and helps her feel empowered reflects the burden of her daily powerlessness.

Significantly, in what becomes a radical revision of the myth, Esch "becomes" Medea as a way to hurt Manny, not her unborn child.[59]

Mythology also becomes a mechanism by which Esch can begin to come to terms with her pregnancy, which she initially sees as a devastating abstraction, a "secret in my stomach" (80). She hides the pregnancy from her family and struggles to acknowledge it to herself: "I can't say it. I haven't said it to myself yet, out loud. Just chased it around in my head" (86). But in the novel's short timeframe, mythological imagery helps Esch's feelings toward her pregnancy evolve from utter dread to growing acceptance. She reflects, "I lie awake and cannot see anything but that baby, the baby I have formed whole in my head, a black Athena, who reaches for me. Who gives me that name as if it is mine: *Mama*" (219). The sentence structure builds to reveal development in Esch's identity: it begins with Esch first *seeing/encountering* the image of the baby, then *imagining* her as a tiny goddess who needs Esch and *physically reaches* for her. The sentence comes to a crescendo when the baby *gives* Esch the name "Mama," and this performative language seems to spark in Esch some acceptance of her new role. Imagining what a child will one day call her begins to transform Esch from a fetus-carrying vessel into a mother. In describing the baby as a "black Athena," Ward also makes reference to Martin Bernal's counterhistory of western civilization. Bernal sought to recuperate the African and Semitic influences on ancient Greece that he argued had been erased by racism.

[59] Over the course of the narrative, Esch gets only partway through Hamilton's text; this may also influence her feelings about Medea.

Esch's way of exploring and articulating herself through symbolic language is an identity-building strategy that Gunilla Theander Kester observes in earlier bildungsromane with black female protagonists. Kester argues that in *The Bluest Eye* and *Eva's Man*, "silent" young girls "invent a language with which they can begin to speak or write themselves . . .[a]gainst cultural and social expectations."[60] These girls often use metaphors to express "memory and desire" and push back against "a code of racial and sexual abuse" (74). Esch, by aligning herself with Medea, pushes back against the home environment that overlooks her womanliness and against her own belief that she is ordinary and powerless. She pushes back against her life of deprivation by creating an expansive inner world, a personal mythology.

Ward also uses Esch's engagement with mythology to subvert the reader's cultural expectations about her protagonist. At a 2015 reading and discussion of her work, Ward shared why she felt it so important to make Esch—poor, black, southern, and female—the novel's narrator. She explained, "There's a national narrative of a girl like her, the assumption is she's lazy, stupid, and the list goes on. Destined to be nothing. I wanted to speak against that."[61] Ward challenges this assumption by giving Esch access to the classics, usually reserved for the learned, as a framework for personal analysis.

Ward also uses mythology to push back against literary and cultural expectations about herself as a black woman writer. In an interview included in later editions of the

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[60] We similarly see a protagonist invent a language for expression in *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza creates stories that allow her to examine herself from a more distant third-person perspective. She explains: "I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, 'And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked'" (109).

[61] This event took place at the University of Texas at Austin on September 24, 2015. I attended the event and transcribed Ward's responses to moderator and audience questions.

novel, Ward says that her inspiration for linking Esch with myth stemmed from her anger over the treatment of black women writers and their restricted access to the canon:

> It infuriates me that the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as 'other.' I wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western heritage. (264-265)

The mythological allusions in *Salvage the Bones* connect the novel with its bildungsroman lineage, most obviously with the myth-laden *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Though Stephen, like his namesake Daedelus, begins to construct his own wings to leave Dublin, it seems unlikely that anyone will send a chariot to carry Esch away from Bois Sauvage. Importantly though, mythology provides Esch with a daily mental escape from her environment and even, a rare source of feminine connection.

So, while Esch is able to find some comfort and room for exploring herself through close sibling relationships, sexual encounters, and mythology, the constant pressures in her life make it hard to imagine the future. On top of the daily crises she faces, Hurricane Katrina strikes, threatening to wipe out Esch's future altogether. Ward uses this real-life event and an unusually compressed narrative timeframe of just twelve days to emphasize the insecurity of life in deep poverty.[62] For Esch, living in an environment of such deprivation dramatically foreshortens her view of the future—the only chance at happiness she can see is Manny, and she does not allow herself any

[62] As I discuss in Chapter Two, contemporary bildungsroman authors like Adichie, Choi, Park, and Moore frequently include real life events in their coming-of-age narratives, most commonly the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

dreams of a career, of college, or of one day leaving the Pit. Unlike most coming-of-age protagonists, Esch has no vision of upward mobility. Further, the family lives in a location, the Gulf Coast, that lies in the path of hurricanes. The devastating storms of the past ("Camille" and "Elaine") are part of her family lore, so geography also contributes to Esch's limited view of the future. While the bildungsroman traditionally illustrates a protagonist's change and growth over time, Ward uses the compressed narrative and deadly real-life event of Hurricane Katrina—an event that disproportionately affected poor, black Americans—to show how dramatically life can change in an instant, particularly for those in deep poverty.

Indeed, Esch's deep poverty leaves her family at great risk in the storm: they do not have enough food, they have no working vehicle, and they do not have anywhere to go even if they wanted to evacuate. Yet they do survive the hurricane, swimming through rising waters and fallen tree limbs to get to higher ground. The violent storm forces all of the conditions of Esch's life to collide—poverty, pregnancy, parental loss and neglect, and deep sibling bonds. The hurricane, like Mama's death, changes everything for Esch, and it ultimately affects her sense of self and her future.

Though the Pit is left battered and the town is "swallowed . . . and vomited out in pieces," the storm also produces positive changes (252). The shared trauma of Katrina unites Daddy and his children, as he is moved by the storm to step up as his children's protector. Esch describes how the family huddles to brace against the storm's strong winds: "Daddy kneels behind us, tries to gather all of us to him" (231). The children feel themselves softening toward their father in response. In the wake of the storm, Daddy is

in tremendous pain because three of his fingers were severed and the wounds have become infected. He is also suffering withdrawal from alcohol. So, when the children go out to survey the storm's damage, they come across remnants of a liquor store and scour the ground for liquor for him. Their disappointment and fear are replaced by a desire to help him. The storm and Daddy's weak condition push the children to accept his shortcomings, a negotiation common in coming-of-age narratives with younger protagonists.

During the storm, Esch's father and brothers discover her pregnancy—and to Esch's surprise, they rally around her. Because of the siblings' history of closeness, her brother Skeetah realized that Esch was pregnant before she could bring herself to tell him, and he prioritizes her safety during the storm. Then, her father tells her they should make her a doctor's appointment to keep her and the baby healthy, so that "nothing will go wrong" (247). Daddy will help Esch get the prenatal care she had not previously considered. Just as mythology helped push Esch to finally acknowledge her pregnancy to herself, her father's supportive acceptance of her "terrible truth" allows her to feel a new degree of peace with it (36). With Daddy's new support, Esch immediately begins to imagine the concrete details of life as a parent, musing, "Wonder where the baby will sleep, wonder if it will lay curled up in the bed with me. If I will teach Junior to give it a bottle, the way Daddy taught us. He is old enough now" (247). Esch even picks out names for the baby. Her family's show of support allows her to begin to imagine the future and envision her new life as a parent.

In envisioning this new future—herself as a mother, her baby living with the family in the Pit—Esch is also able to begin to come to terms with what seems like the inevitable absence of Manny from her and her child's life. But again, just as she and her brothers gave each other the parental care they lacked, someone else offers to step in as the baby's father. Throughout the novel, Big Henry, a friend of Esch's brothers, is a figure of reliability and quiet tenderness. He gives Esch and her siblings rides, he and his mother house the family after the storm, and Esch notes with curious surprise that he is the only friend around who never pursued her for sex. While Esch was obsessively trying to get Manny to really "see" her and look her in the eyes, she missed the fact that Big Henry seemed to be noticing and appreciating her all along. After the storm, he asks Esch who the baby's father is, and she replies, "It don't have a daddy" (254). This denial suggests that Esch understands that Manny will not step up to this responsibility, nor will he ever come to love her. But Big Henry immediately tells her that she is wrong: "This baby got a daddy, Esch. This baby got plenty daddies. Don't forget you always got me" (255). With promised support from the army of men around her, including her father and perhaps most promisingly, Big Henry, the novel comes to a tentatively hopeful, forward-looking conclusion. In its last line, Esch says, "I am a mother," using language of identification to affirm her new role—and her new life (258).

Winter's Bone—Frozen Land, Frozen Growth

In *Winter's Bone*, Daniel Woodrell explores the same deep poverty that distorts Esch's life, but his protagonist's circumstances are even more dire. Though Ree does not

face the legacy of racism that Esch does, the girls' experiences are connected by hunger, loss, and lack. In a 2014 interview, Ward describes poverty as undiscriminating in its frustration of development: "There's a hopelessness that assails you when you're living in a place like this when you're black and poor, or when you're white and poor—just poor, period…It grinds people down" (Murphy).

Woodrell's Ree has felt life "grinding her down" for all of her sixteen years. While Esch's childhood collapsed at age eight, the day her mother died, Ree Dolly never had one at all, thanks to the pressures of abject poverty, parental abuse and neglect, and an often-threatening community with its own harsh code of conduct. These burdens, as well as the responsibility she feels toward her younger siblings, stunt her development and limit her sense of opportunity.

Woodrell is the second male author featured in this study, and he has remarked that the women characters he writes are "usually pretty potent women" (Gross). Debra Granik, the director of the highly acclaimed 2010 film adaptation of *Winter's Bone*, has praised Woodrell's portraits of women, saying that the author "gets huge props around the world, at this point, for writing women that women in the audience are enjoying hugely" (Gross).

Winter's Bone is set deep in the Ozark Mountains, an environment Woodrell knows well: his family has been there since the 1840s, and he lives there today (Cabot). Woodrell has described his work as "country noir,"[63] and like *Salvage the Bones*, it is

[63] Woodrell explains that he offered this term to distinguish his work from the crime genre with which it was often—and in his view, erroneously—linked. He concedes that the category did not ultimately prove clarifying because of its similarity to the "Southern Gothic" style (Freeman).

often compared to other American classics, particularly the Southern writing of Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner, and Eudora Welty.[64] Ree lives with her two young brothers and her mentally ill mother. Her father, Jessup, is a crystal meth cook who is in and out of jail. Like Esch, Ree lives on long-held family land. Her family's ownership of this land, their only possession of value, is threatened at the beginning of the novel: Ree learns that Jessup has put the house up for bond and disappeared, leaving it at risk of repossession. She begins a desperate search for her father. Like Wilhelm Meister, Ree embarks on a physical journey, and in the end, she, too, must try to replace her father as the head of the family. The impetus for this quest is not personal fulfillment, but poverty and desperation. Along the way, Ree begs for help from family members and the town's most dangerous drug dealer, is beaten severely, and learns that her father has been murdered for becoming a police informant. In the end, she is able to save the family home by taking her father's severed hands to the bail bondsman to prove his death.

Like *Salvage the Bones*, *Winter's Bone's* narrative timeframe is tight, spanning about a week—the length of time Ree has before her father's bail expires. Just as Esch's already-precarious life is threatened by Hurricane Katrina, Ree's survival is threatened by Jessup's impending court date. Woodrell, like Ward, uses the compressed narrative timeframe to illustrate how deep poverty can foreshorten one's view of the future because survival is uncertain. Woodrell tells this story using a limited third-person narrator. While

[64] Most recently, in "Eudora Welty and Daniel Woodrell: Writings of the Upland South," Mae Miller Claxton reads the novel against Welty's 1970 novel, *Losing Battles*. Given this critical focus on the "Americanness" of the novel, it is surprising that Woodrell credits being "under the sway of a bunch of British poets" as inspiring it. He explains the connection: "I came to see the kinship between the old Celtic culture in Northern England and Yorkshire and whatnot and the Ozarks. It's roughly the same gene pool, and the topography is similar" (Freeman).

the narrative perspective concentrates on Ree, Woodrell often keeps us at some remove from her thoughts and feelings—a technique uncommon in the contemporary bildungsroman, which usually grants the reader intimate access to the protagonist. So, while we hear Esch's every thought, worry, desire, and physical craving, Ree is often impenetrable. This is a key difference in the two young women's lives. Esch's life is far from easy, but she has room to get lost in myth and obsess over Manny. However, in *Winter's Bone*, Woodrell's third-person narration underscores the fact that Ree has almost no room for this kind of feeling, processing, and reacting. Instead, she must always focus on formulating her next pragmatic step for survival. Her environment leaves her even less room than Esch had for cultivating likes, dislikes, and desires.

Even without the new threat of homelessness, dire poverty also makes Ree's quotidian concerns more extreme than Esch's. Like Ward, Woodrell illustrates poverty's physical and emotional effects on development through attention to material goods and the body. Ree and her brothers, ages eight and ten, often do not have clean clothes, adequate food, or firewood to stay warm. Woodrell describes their house not by what it has but by what it lacks, noting the "lean cupboard" and "scant woodpile" (4). Ree's daily struggles are also exacerbated by the material interconnectedness of things: because there is no gas for the chainsaw, she has to use an ax to chop big logs into firewood; because there is not enough firewood, the fire burns out before the laundry dries, and clean clothes end up frozen solid.

Hunger is a constant concern for Ree and her family. The children rarely feel full, and when there is only oatmeal for dinner, the boys sometimes "would cry, sit there

spooning down oatmeal but crying for meat, eating all there was while crying for all there could be, become wailing little cyclones of want and need" (8). When Ree goes grocery shopping, Woodrell enumerates every single item in her shopping cart:

> She put noodles, rice and dried beans into the cart. She had already dropped in cans of soup, tomato sauce and tuna, a full chub of bologna, three loaves of bread, two boxes each of oatmeal and grits, plus three family packs of ground beef. She paused to stare at her load, finger at her lips, then put the rice back on the shelf and grabbed more noodles. (122)

The length and level of detail in this mundane description emphasizes how the immanence of hunger makes food a central focus of Ree's and her brothers' existence. Ward's Esch similarly counted every can of food as her family prepared for the hurricane. This kind of detailed description would seem odd in *The Marriage Plot* or *My Education*, where protagonists' basic needs are taken as a given. Yet in *Winter's Bone,* the feeling of satiety is a luxury. When Ree's neighbor brings her a box of food one day, her brothers react to the sight of canned goods as if they were a pile of gifts on Christmas morning; they squeal with delight, "Oh, boy, oh boy" (18). These children are being denied the carefree, nurtured childhood that in America is often considered a birthright. As primary caretaker, Ree feels not excitement but relief at the sight of this gift of food, and her immediate response is to calculate how long that relief can last: "Ree saw four days inside that box. Four days free from hunger or worrying about hunger returning at daybreak, maybe five" (18).

Though Ree does not complain to others about being hungry, her mental calculation here reveals that gnawing physical discomfort is a daily condition in deep poverty. Life has trained her in austerity, the effects of which are revealed even in her response to being offered a cup of coffee. When a relative asks Ree how she takes her coffee, she responds, "[W]ith cream when there is any" (22). Ree also tries to train her brothers to have low expectations, like hers. When grocery shopping, Ree's best friend, Gail, grabs powdered cheese, assuming Ree will want it for all the pasta she is buying. But Ree rejects it as being too costly. When Gail points out the low price of the generic brand, Ree again turns her down: "Nope, once the boys start likin' it they'll want it all the time. It's too expensive" (123). In Ree's life, even generic-brand powdered cheese is a luxury, and luxuries are risky because their inevitable disappearance brings more pain.

As in *Salvage the Bones,* poverty for Ree and her siblings is compounded by family instability and the absence of parental care. Ree's mother was incapacitated by a mental breakdown four years before, and she sits heavily medicated and near-silent in a rocking chair. Unlike Esch's mother, "Mom" is physically alive, but she is mentally and maternally absent; her only effect on Ree's life is to add responsibility. And while Ree has some positive memories of her mother, she also remembers having been left alone all night while her mother went out to bars. Neglect and violence color Ree's childhood; she recalls, for instance, how her drunken grandmother beat her with a garden rake—twice. And just as Daddy scared Esch and her siblings out of crying, Ree also learns in childhood to stifle any show of vulnerability. She must "never cry where her tears might be seen and counted against her" (25-26).

Woodrell, like Ward, presents neglectful parenting as a consequence of environments of deep poverty and deprivation. Like Bois Sauvage, Ree's town is off-the-grid and removed from society at large. It has its own strict code of right and wrong and runs on a common law justice system largely divorced from standard ethics. This code values family loyalty, settlement of debts, selling and using drugs, and the preservation of personal freedoms. This community code shapes Ree's sense of her own value and her options. When Ree asks her uncle to help her find her father before his court date, for instance, he criticizes her for getting involved at all: "That's a personal choice, little girl . . . Show or don't show, that choice is up to the one that's goin' to jail to make, not you" (23). Even though Ree and her brothers could end up homeless if their father makes the "personal choice" to skip his court hearing, this choice would be his right.

This common disregard for how one's choices might affect others contributes to the parental instability in Ree's home. Her father proves to be a source of great anxiety and insecurity for Ree. Jessup's movement in and out of her life trains her to accept overwhelming levels of responsibility and to expect disappointment, and Ree has learned over time not to trust him because he is "a goddam promiser" (57). As a methamphetamine (or "crank") cook, Jessup has had multiple stints in jail, and the job puts him at risk for arrest every day. But it is not only Jessup's job that makes him an unreliable parent. He also regularly takes off on a whim, promising to bring his children "trunkloads of delights" when he gets back, but failing to leave them with adequate food, firewood, or any notion of when he will return (4). Just as Esch's father passed all caretaking responsibilities to his children after their mother died, Jessup leaves the

burden of caring for two young kids and a mentally ill mother to Ree. Jessup lacks concern for how his children will physically survive his absence or how they might be emotionally affected by such instability. In fact, when Ree last saw her father before his final disappearance, his goodbye was particularly callous. He told her: "Start lookin' for me soon as you see my face. 'Til then, don't even wonder" (4). Jessup is not mean like Esch's father, but Woodrell shows how his unreliability is itself cruel and taxing. At sixteen, Ree has long been conditioned to her father's absence, but as a child, her desire for his safe return dominated her thoughts. She "spent so many long days and longer nights" listening hard for the sound of his car (95). In an unnatural inversion of roles, Ree acted as the worried parent when just a little girl.

Ree's parents' relationship further contributed to the instability of her home life and taught her to link romantic love with betrayal and violence. During Jessup's stints in prison, Mom went out at night with other men, and young Ree would sometimes awaken to find her beaten up. Mom minimized the abuse when talking to Ree, casually explaining that the bruises were something a "beau did, sayin' good-bye" (41). Later, Mom would tell Ree—not yet a teenager—stories about these nights out at bars and motels, including the "terrible ass-whippings she'd taken during one-night stands" (41). Ree's father, meanwhile, kept a long-term girlfriend. Ree discovers this as a child when he drops her off at the woman's house, insisting Ree care for the woman because she has fallen ill. Both parents treat Ree not as a child but as a peer or proxy. She is given secrets by one parent to keep from the other and is, to varying degrees, forced to get involved in their extramarital relationships.

Ree's understanding that she comes second to her parents' romantic relationship recalls Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), another female bildungsroman that explores the limitations of bildung in deep poverty and gross neglect. In this book, also set in the rural south, young Bone is physically and sexually abused by her stepfather. Though her mother discovers the abuse, she repeatedly reconciles with the man. The abuse affects Bone's development and identity, but her most grievous loss is of her mother's protection: "I wanted her to love me enough to leave him, to pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be" (107). As I will discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, Bone's mother ultimately picks her husband over her daughter, even after witnessing him rape her.

Ree's daily life revolves around making sure other people's needs get met, and this fact profoundly limits the space she has for her own feelings and development. We see this in her response to Jessup's disappearance. Ree understands that in prying into the secrets of the crank business to look for him, she is risking her life. But she does not allow herself to worry about this risk; instead, she worries only about the survival of the family members she would leave behind if killed. So pragmatically, Ree begins training her brothers to care for themselves and their mother. She teaches the young boys how to shoot and get meat from squirrels, how to wash their mother's hair, and how to fight bullies who might threaten them. Movingly, Ree also shields the boys from understanding the risk she is up against, or even knowing why their father has disappeared. For instance, when she wants to teach the boys to make venison stew so they can cook for themselves, Ree says casually, "I'll be fixin' deer stew tonight. That

sound good? . . . Haul them chairs over here and stand on 'em with your eyes peeled and watch every goddamn thing I do. Learn how I make it, then you both'll know" (19). She tries to provide them the protection from worry that her parents never gave her.

The weight of being a resourceless caretaker also shapes Ree's view of her future. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the bildungsroman's traditional focus on the culmination of development via marriage, procreation, or settling into one's "appropriate" place in society has been superseded by an emphasis on continued personal exploration. At the conclusion of most contemporary bildungsromane, protagonists generally view their identity development as ongoing and unfolding; heroines look to the future with a hopeful but open-ended vision of what it will bring. At the end of the novels in Chapters One and Two, each protagonist feels a stronger, more confident sense of self; the celebrated endpoint of the female contemporary bildungsroman in the US is often now increased personal agency and the ability to make empowered decisions. Ree's dream for the future, however, is strikingly different: instead of wanting to stand out, she wants to blend in. Her hope is to one day join the Army to become part of a disciplined collective. The draw of the Army for Ree is that there, "you got to travel with a gun and they made everybody help keep things clean" (15). This dream reveals Ree's deeply limited sense of future possibility. She does not want to join the Army because she dreams of seeing the world or because she wants to help defend her nation. Nor does she secretly dream of becoming a writer or scholar like so many other bildungsroman subjects. And, in a challenge to the very notion of bildung, Ree does not desire increased self-knowledge and individuation. Ree simply wants the safety and order she has never

known at home. After sixteen years of inherited responsibility and narrow options, Ree wants only a reduction in her burdens, just "her own concerns to tote" (15). Her dream is not to be "a unique" but to blend in—to be enveloped by order, tidiness, and sheer numbers. We see in Ree's ambition that individualism is for the privileged. The collective, though, offers protection for the vulnerable.

So, while Ree's dream is relatively meager compared to the lofty professional goals of protagonists in the previous chapters, her deprived local environment makes the dream feel farfetched. Woodrell describes his literary characters as people who often do not "really expect to get out" (Atkinson). He explains:

> [T]here are whole levels of American culture where they'd have to attend a class on how to apply for a job. I'm not trying to be mean; I'm just telling the truth. You'd actually have to tell them things like, 'Now, don't go in with liquor on your breath.' Shit like that. Well, they're not necessarily aspiring to the middle-class dream. (Atkinson)

So, though Ree makes sure her brothers get on the school bus every day, she herself dropped out of high school, perhaps unaware she would need a diploma to join the Army. Formal education has even less place in Ree's life and identity than it does in Esch's. Her community offers one main future: drug abuse. When Ree admits to a relative that her father "cooks crank," the woman responds, "Honey, they all do now. You don't even need to say it out loud" (51). Indeed, nearly every person Ree encounters offers her drugs, including her Uncle Teardrop. He snorts meth in front of her and asks, "You got the taste for it yet?"; the word "yet" suggests the inevitability of her eventual

methamphetamine use (113). When Ree turns him down, Teardrop sounds nearly offended: "Suit yourself, little girl" (113). The epithet "little girl" mocks Ree for resisting drugs, a rare source of pleasure in a deprived life. Later, when Ree is desperate for money after learning her father was killed, Teardrop offers to "learn her how to earn" in their community, an invitation to sell drugs. When Ree responds that she "won't touch crank," Teardrop counteroffers: "There's other stuff to do, too, if you'll do it" (190). Her uncle recognizes her desperate position and is genuinely trying to help her, yet all he can propose is that Ree sell drugs or prostitute herself. The dearth of options in Ree's world starves even the most modest dreams.

Yet despite her environment of utter deprivation and neglect, Ree, like Esch, still finds an important outlet for care, affection, and some degree of personal development: her best friend, Gail. As friends for nearly a decade, Ree and Gail are incredibly close. This closeness has recently been challenged because Gail, still a teenager, has had a baby and married a controlling man—Gail represents the other future available in Ree's community. But still, Ree and Gail continue to provide each other with important compensations for what they are denied in other relationships. We see them serving as surrogate parents and romantic partners to each other, and their tenderness underscores the violence and hardness all around them. They call each other pet names ("Sweet Pea") and share a physical closeness, which Woodrell highlights by detailing every touch and gesture. For instance, he notes each time Ree "began rubbing Gail's neck"; when she "draped an arm across Gail's shoulders"; when she "lay down with her hip touching Gail's" (121, 123 150). In a spare novel of less than 200 pages, these repeated

descriptions of physical caress are striking, and with them, Woodrell, like Ward, emphasizes the importance of touch and care, both for bildung and daily survival.

Ree and Gail also help keep each other safe and alive. When Ree needs a ride to search for her father, Gail borrows a car for her, and when Gail's husband kicks her out of the house, she temporarily moves in with Ree (31). Most crucially, when Ree is beaten by the female relatives of the local drug kingpin, Gail's intervention likely saves Ree's life. Though the women in Ree's community are trained to fear men, in many scenes in the novel, it is the women who are the agents of action, both good and bad. Mae Mill Claxon explains why this is so: "In a patriarchal society, women act to maintain the collective value system, teaching lessons to those who disobey the rules" (94). When Ree disobeys the rules, failing to heed warnings to stop asking questions about her father's whereabouts, a group of women beat her viciously to teach her such a lesson. She is knocked unconscious, loses several teeth, and soils herself during the attack. Back home, Gail puts her in the tub and nurses her: "Gail stood her straight and naked and cleaned her body as she would a babe's, using the soiled skirt to swab the spread muck from her ass and thighs and behind the knees. Gail touched her fingers to the revealed welts and bruises and shook between cries" (142). Woodrell emphasizes the severity of Ree's injuries through Gail's embodied response to surveying her body: Gail "touched" and "shook" and "cried," experiencing Ree's pain as if it were her own (142). The friends' intimacy is total. DuPlessis highlights "woman-to-woman bonds" like this as another common way that authors can *write beyond the ending* for female protagonists. Ree's relationship with Gail is indeed crucial to her survival—physically, emotionally, and

even spiritually. This female relationship is especially significant in light of the woman-to-woman violence Ree experiences (5).

Besides being an important source of love and care, Gail is Ree's partner in their first sexual explorations. Sexuality offers the girls a rare site for personal exploration, discovery, and pleasure, as it does for Esch. As children, Ree and Gail practiced kissing with each other, taking turns "acting as a man" (87). After first kissing Gail, Ree "opened her eyes then and smiled" (87). Their "practice" brings such unanticipated pleasure that the girls continue their physical relationship for "three seasons . . . puckering readily anytime they were alone, each being the man and the woman, each on top and bottom, pushing for it with grunts or receiving it with sighs" (87). When Ree later kisses a boy for the first time, she is disappointed by his timidity, and because he is not Gail.

Gail offers Ree the only safe context for exploring her developing sexuality. From her mother's bruises, Ree has been trained to see sex with men as violent, and she herself was raped at fifteen by a friend of her father's. So while Madeleine, Regina, Ifemelu, Jane, and Esch can find sex pleasurable and, at times, even personally illuminating, Ree's only experience with heterosexual intercourse is a vicious assault that reinforces the danger of letting her guard down. Brutally revising the contemporary bildungsroman's focus on relaxed, flexible, and empowered female sexuality, Woodrell emphasizes how Ree's female body is an added vulnerability in her community. This is a threat to which she stays closely attuned. For instance, when a neighbor giving her a ride pulls his car over, Ree immediately thinks he will try to have sex with her. She declares, "Man, I ain't gettin' back there in that camper!" Put off by her assumption, he asks, "You think I'm

wantin' to fuck *you*?" and Ree responds, "If you are, you'll be fuckin' me dead! That's the only way" (74). Ree's instinct to see *any* man as potentially dangerous functions as a survival skill in her community. Ironically, though, it is women who prove far more dangerous to her survival.

Although the adolescent sexual exploration between Ree and Gail is shown as positive and mutual, we see that Ree has enduring romantic feelings for Gail that are unevenly reciprocated. In moments of ongoing physicality in the girl's friendship, it is always Ree who initiates each touch and caress. Apart from her dream of joining the Army, Gail becomes Ree's only hope for future happiness, just as Esch pinned all her desires on Manny. But Ree is also realistic, and this means expecting her future to be bleak: "she considered forever and how shadowed and lonely it would likely be. In Ree's heart there was room for more. Any evening spent with Gail was like one of the yearning stories from her sleep was happening awake" (100). Woodrell links these sentences to show that the "more" that Ree wants is Gail. Gail offers Ree at once a reprieve from life's constant hardness and a vague reach towards something more. She is a literal dream come true for Ree, but like a dream, Gail is ephemeral: she always goes home to her husband. After Gail ends her temporary cohabitation with Ree to return to him, Ree pleads, "You didn't like it? You gonna tell me you didn't like it?" Gail replies, "I liked it. I liked it, but not enough" (160).

The narrative distance from Ree in this moment keeps the "it" to which she refers here decidedly hazy—perhaps she means they rekindled a sexual relationship, perhaps she means just the chance to share in daily life together. While Ree's aggressive question

("You gonna tell me you didn't like it?") reveals her unhappiness with Gail's decision to leave, Woodrell does not let us see how the rejection affects her. This elision is in sharp contrast to Ward's illustration of Esch's moments of emotional distress. When Manny chooses to stay with his girlfriend instead of being with Esch, Esch responds with raw emotion, "If I could, I would reach inside of me and pull out my heart" (122). When Gail chooses to return to her husband instead of staying with Ree because she did not like it "enough," Ree immediately responds with a non sequitur, a question about selling family timber to save the house. This deflection is significant: Ree never has the chance to sit with her own emotions or grief because pragmatic concerns incessantly demand her attention.

Just as Hurricane Katrina pushed Esch to come to terms with her pregnancy and her family, the crisis of Ree's father's disappearance similarly brings into sharp focus the conditions of her life—deep poverty, premature family responsibility, friendship, and a vengeful, unforgiving environment and local code. Her quest to find her father not only leaves her physically battered, it also changes Ree's view of herself, her family, and her future. Ree simply cannot imagine a viable life if she loses the family house; she truly believes that she and her brothers will be homeless and robbed of humanity, living "in the fields… like dogs. Like fuckin' dogs" (134). It never occurs to her that someone might take them in, and indeed, no one ever offers them shelter.

So, to try to survive, Ree draws on the very resiliency and fearlessness that daily life has demanded of her, and she turns to the community that has threatened her. In this community, where most people "are cousins to some vague degree," family lineage is

both a cross to bear and one of the only sources of social capital. When begging the wife of the local drug kingpin, Thump Milton, for information about her missing father, Ree thus focuses on her lineage:

> "I'm a Dolly. My dad's Jessup Dolly. I'm Ree."
>
> "Which Jessup would that be?"
>
> "From Rathlin Valley. Teardrop's brother. I mean Haslam's. Teardrop was born a Haslam."
>
> "I believe I know who Teardrop is. That'd make your Jessup the man who married the pretty Bromont girl."
>
> "That's right—Mom used to be Connie Bromont."
>
> "Jack's littlest sister. I knew Jack." (5)

When the woman still refuses to let Ree talk to Thump, Ree again invokes blood ties in her plea: "Please—I *am a Dolly!* Some of our blood at least is the same. That's s'posed to *mean* somethin'—ain't that what is always said?" (59, emphasis in original). When Thump Milton himself refuses to see her, Ree loudly challenges his loyalty to this code in an attempt to shame him: "So, come the nut-cuttin', blood don't truly mean shit to him" (63). When the community code might have helped her, Ree comes up hard against its limits and hypocrisy.

But along her brief journey, Ree also discovers how deeply she has absorbed this code. It even affects her reaction to her father's death. When she finally learns Jessup was murdered for giving the police information about the drug trade in exchange for a reduced prison sentence, her primary response is shame and disappointment. She

expresses neither grief nor anger at his killer. She tells her uncle, "What I really, really can't stand . . . is how I feel so ashamed . . . for Dad. Snitchin' just goes against everything" (149). The shame that Ree feels here in effect robs her of the chance to mourn her father, or at least, to mourn how his absence will leave her saddled with care for the family and prevent her from joining the Army. When her uncle tries to reason that Jessup could not bear to be away from his family for such a long prison term, Ree is unmoved: "But snitchin'. . ." (149). This reaction illustrates how Ree's upbringing and environment have robbed her of the kind of parental attachment that is generally considered essential in a nurtured childhood.

In fact, the hopelessness that permeates Ree's environment gives rise to the sense that life is predetermined, and predetermined to be a struggle. This fatalistic view is inimical to the very concept of bildung, which is supposed to offer an individual the opportunity for personal development and individuation. Instead, Ree's community believes that a child's path is firmly set at birth, depending on the first name they are given. In Ree's world, a small number of male names are used over and over, a longstanding practice designed to confuse law enforcement: "Let any sheriff or similar nabob try to keep official accounts on the Dolly men when so many were named Milton, Haslam, Arthur, or Jessup" (61-62). Each of the Dolly family names, especially Milton, is seen as determining a child's future:

> If you named a son Milton it was a decision that attempted to chart the life he'd live before he even stepped into it, for among Dollys the name carried expectations and history. Some names could rise to walk many paths in many

> directions, but Jessups, Arthurs, Haslams, and Miltons were born to walk only the beaten Dolly path to the shadowed place, live and die in keeping with those bloodline customs fiercest held. (62)

Ree's brother Harold avoided one of these fated names because Ree, who was just eight years old at the time, helped her mother dissuade her father from naming the new baby Milton. Though Ree felt this a victory, she later faults herself for not helping her brother Sonny (whose birth name is Jessup) avoid the burden of his name and fate: she "a thousand times wished she'd fought longer for Sonny, shouted him into Adam or Leotis or Eugene, shouted until he was named to expect choices" (62). But Ree's focus on the burden of certain names amounts to a denial of the harsh reality: no one, regardless of name, has many options in her world.

In the end, Ree and her family do get to keep the house. This development, too, is shaped by the community code, gruesome violence, and loss. When the women who beat up Ree are criticized for their actions, they begrudgingly take her to her father's body as a sort of peace offering. They then help her saw off both of her father's hands to prove his death to the court, and this evidence saves the family's house from repossession. In contrast to the contemporary female bildungsroman's focus on empowered decision-making and increased personal agency, as seen in Chapters One and Two, it is ultimately this aid from others that allows Ree to survive and look beyond the present moment. Just as the support Esch receives from her father and Big Henry helps her more clearly imagine her future as a mother, the aid from these women, however gruesome, ultimately facilitates Ree's gaining a slightly more expansive view of her own future.

Incredibly, the violent act of severing her dead father's hands contributes to a somewhat forward-looking ending. A bondsman shows up and unexpectedly gives Ree her father's bail money. Impressed with her grit in finding her father's body, the man says he would hire Ree as a bondswoman if she had her own transportation. The surprising influx of cash prompts Ree's brothers to worry that the bond money will allow her to leave them for the Army; they, too, are trained to expect disappointment and abandonment. Yet Ree vows to stay, and in the novel's final word, she excitedly tells her brothers that she will use the money to get "wheels." A secure home, a job, and the promise of transportation offer Ree a modest sense of stability and increased personal freedom, and this, in turn, allows her to have a slightly broader view of her future.

Deep Poverty, Bildung, and Fragments of Hope

In *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone*, personal development and identity formation are dramatically shaped by deep poverty and its conditions. Esch's and Ree's daily lives are difficult, their opportunities dramatically limited, their futures uncertain. Their environments shape how they see the world and their place in it; unlike the bildungsroman subjects of the rags-to-riches narratives of the past, neither Esch nor Ree expects to rise out of her low-class position to a place where life is comfortable and where her tenacity, care, and intelligence are noticed and appreciated. Read in this moment of cultural attention to protracted, extended, or ongoing coming of age, and against the literary trend of *weiterbildungsromane* that explore the developmental experiences of adult protagonists, these two novels show that not all women are granted

the privilege of extended self-discovery. In their representations of the deep poverty invisible to mainstream America, Ward and Woodrell highlight the staggering inequity of life in the US and remind us that our beliefs in "nature over nurture" and boundless individual opportunity are very often fictions premised on romantic ideology. Esch is feeding her infant brother at eight, having sex at twelve, and becoming pregnant and fighting to survive a hurricane at fifteen. Ree is worrying about warmth, food, and her father's whereabouts as a young child, taking care of two small boys and her mother at twelve, and being raped and badly beaten by age sixteen.

And yet, for all the pain, worry, and instability that Esch and Ree experience, their narrative journeys end on tentatively hopeful, forward-looking notes, much like the bildungsromane in Chapters One and Two. That they can find some sense of hope powerfully illustrates the contemporary bildungsroman's inclination toward open endings and ongoing bildung. The young women's roads ahead look a little brighter, and each has gained some self-awareness as to what she wants and values. Esch is starting to imagine herself as a mother and has been promised support from those around her, including her father. Ree has won back the family house and received some unexpected bond money, and a potential job offers the possibility of increased financial stability and freedom.

Though Esch's and Ree's views of the future are still much more limited than the protagonists in Chapters One and Two, the fact that both young women can conjure some hope in their lives at all is in fact revisionary. Unlike impoverished bildungsroman heroes like Jude Fawley and Maggie Tulliver, Esch and Ree reach the end of their narratives

alive. And unlike Bone in Allison's more recent *Bastard out of Carolina*, they have some hope for ongoing development. At just age twelve, Bone recognizes that she "was already who [she] was going to be" (309). She accepts that she will inevitably be like her mother, the woman who abandoned her to be with the man who had raped and beaten Bone. Though Bone is devastated by her mother's rejection, she can imagine herself repeating it with her own children some day: "I was who I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309). Bone feels no hope that her life might turn out any differently. Ward and Woodrell, on the other hand, show that even in deep poverty, there is life—including some opportunity for connection, fulfillment, and personal change.

In these novels, hope looks quite different than it did for Madeleine, Regina, Ifemelu, and Jane, who, at the end of their stories, feel a new degree of empowered independence and agency to write their own futures. Instead, the tentative optimism that Esch and Ree feel at the end of their narratives comes from making the best of a hard situation, accepting aid from others, and finding a way to envision the future and keep going. Still, it is impossible to shake the sense that Esch's and Ree's lives will always be hard, and indeed, their optimistic endings entail tough compromises. Ree's "victory" is that she gets to keep on living the exhausting life she has always had—raising her two young brothers and caring for her disabled mother on her own in a cold shelter. The bond money will help for a while, but it comes at a price: she has not only lost her father, but also whatever respect she may have had for him. She is also isolated, as the community shuns her because Jessup snitched. And finally, though Ree is excited about the opportunity for employment, becoming a bondswoman will put her at physical risk each

day. This too, shows poverty's cyclical nature: just as Ree worried about her father's safety as a meth cook in a hostile, underground drug trade, Ree's brothers will likely fear for her safe return each day; they have already seen Ree beaten nearly to death for asking the wrong questions of the wrong people. In a similar way, Esch's new hope is also tempered. She survives Hurricane Katrina and gains her family's support for her pregnancy, but her reality is also far from easy: the family home has been ripped apart by the storm, and Manny, who has finally looked at her and seen her, has rejected her and their unborn child.

US cultural narratives of coming of age commonly depict identity formation as a process tinged with loss, whether romantic heartbreak or material disappointment. We expect some hurt and disappointment in the bildungsroman, and over the course of their coming-of-age stories, Madeleine, Regina, Ifemelu, and Jane all have painful experiences. The difference in *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* is that for Esch and Ree, trauma, loss, and hardship are not episodic but chronic. These conditions are a constant pressure on their growth and identity development: with stakes always high and options always few, there is little room for the kind of self-exploration and discovery we expect during coming of age. Instead, Esch's and Ree's development can be seen as being limited by what Bolaki calls "bound motion." For Bolaki, this concept illustrates how trauma for ethnic protagonists can *qualify* mobility or development without necessarily *obliterating* it (37). Such bounded movement, she argues, often takes on "a melancholic quality" (37). This concept captures Ree's and Esch's situations at the end of each novel: for both girls, there is real potential for new opportunities, new support, and

maybe even for some happiness. But this potential exists within the limits already imposed by poverty, family, and community structures. So, while Ree is excited by the unexpected prospects of money and a job, she has to defer or abandon her dream of joining the Army to stay with her brothers, who have no one else to care for them. Similarly, even as Esch begins to feel more positive about her impending role as mother, it is difficult to ignore the pragmatic implications of adding a new mouth to feed to a resource-strapped family. Moynihan articulates this tension in Esch's position beautifully, describing her impending motherhood as "an ambivalent and compromised form of power" (561). Motherhood may brighten Esch's existence, but it will also carry costs.

Still, despite the heavy constraints on Esch's and Ree's development, these novels remain easily identifiable as coming-of-age stories. The authors use common features of the form, including sexual exploration, parental disappointment, romantic love, and, as is increasingly common today, an open and hopeful ending. As a result, we view Esch's and Ree's experiences in the context of generic and cultural expectations about childhood and adolescent development, and this gives the novels some power of social critique. Because we feel we know the coming-of-age "story" and how bildung is "supposed" to unfold, it is easy to discern what opportunities Esch and Ree are denied and what care they do not receive. For instance, we have longstanding cultural expectations of childhood as a time of innocence and play, but in *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone,* moments of fun, joy, or lightness are so rare that their appearance is jarring. We read this as unfair, a loss. The instability and deprivation Esch and Ree face stretches our understanding of the

parameters of childhood, adulthood, and opportunity, as well as our narratives of coming of age.

Coda: On Connection and Revision

The best moments in reading are when you come across something—a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things—which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

—Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*

[E]ach reader becomes his own Wilhelm Meister, an apprentice, a traveller, on his own account.

—Henry James, review of Thomas Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meister*, 1865

To conclude this project, I want to reflect on its own *Bildungsprozess*—the sites, insights, and setbacks that shaped its coming into being, and the directions in which it might continue to grow. I begin by offering a brief summary of the main conclusions of the preceding sections. By bringing together a set of very contemporary bildungsromane with female protagonists, I have argued for the ongoing vitality of a genre that is nearly 250 years old and that scholars have called "dead" and "a phantom." I have highlighted how today's authors—men and women—are deeply interested in the female coming-of-age process. Over the course of this dissertation, I have shown how these authors engage with, pay homage to, and revise the genre to represent the concerns of identity formation in this contemporary moment. In turn, these new versions of the American women's bildungsroman, and the literature they represent, offer new conceptions of female identity formation and new, more varied paths toward womanhood.

In each of my chapters, I used a traditional trope of the bildungsroman—education and learning; migration and mobility; and social class and deep poverty—to

map out old connections, new directions, and the pressures and goals for contemporary female bildung today. A number of trends emerged. First, protagonists are frequently older than in the past, a trend I represent with the category of the *weiterbildungsroman*. Today's protagonists are also very diverse in race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, and sexual orientation, reflecting the "melting pot" nature of the US population, our enduring class structures, and a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality. Indeed, far from feeling that their development must be oriented toward marriage, these protagonists have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences. To borrow Buckley's words, these experiences range from "debasing" to "exalting," though today's authors often present romantic ruptures as particularly influential and personally illuminating (18).

Another common thread that runs throughout these texts is the emphasis on personal and academic learning. Both types of learning occur at sites old and new. Today's female protagonists still regularly find themselves in the nanny or "governess" role, a traditional site of knowledge acquisition. Just as in the past, these positions spark both romantic relationships and personal insights. Further, the same dusty books that sustained Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver also move Madeleine, Regina, and Esch. And yet today's female protagonists also have a far greater sense of their professional opportunity, a fact that gets reflected in the growing focus on the college and graduate school classroom (classrooms from which Jane and Maggie would have been excluded for their sex).

In another revision from the traditional female bildungsroman, these literary women are, on the whole, highly mobile. Ifemelu, for instance, lives in no fewer than six

cities over the course of just a few years. This geographic flexibility at once reflects and provides a personal mutability, as a new place offers these young women an opportunity to change the "self" they present to themselves and the world, yet also can dramatically change how they are perceived by the larger world. This variance in reception proves especially true for protagonists of color.

Yet perhaps most strikingly, some new iterations of the bildungsroman forcefully remind us of the privilege inherent in an extended, exploratory coming-of-age process; these widened opportunities and longer paths to womanhood are simply not available to everyone. In this group of texts, deep poverty is shown to be one condition that cannot be fought—unlike racial discrimination, a working class background, or the limiting status of immigrant. Madeleine and Regina can follow their passions, their hearts, and even their whims in ways that Esch and Ree, deeply constrained by poverty, responsibility, and worry, would be simply unable to fathom. By the end of these narratives, Madeleine, Regina, Ifemelu, and Jane can make independent decisions for themselves: they can quit jobs if they do not suit or inspire them, end partnerships that work but do not fulfill them enough, and move and start anew if they need a fresh start. But Esch and Ree continue to worry about food, shelter, and being so invisible they are cast out into the streets to live as dogs. Tellingly, Esch's and Ree's narratives cover only a handful of days, not years, and their journeys of bildung are narrowly circumscribed. In other texts under study, we see how racial discrimination and experiences of trauma can similarly limit one's view of future opportunities.

Still, as I have attempted to show throughout this dissertation, across these vast differences in the circumstances and backgrounds of their protagonists, all six bildungsromane conclude with a hopeful, open gaze toward the future—a shift that is highly revisionary when considered within the larger history of the genre. Crucial to this forward-looking lens is the belief that there is "world enough, and time" to change, grow, and experience; that development is an ongoing process rather than a distinct period confined to youth. Throughout the genre's history, bildungsroman authors have often pinpointed a single moment when the protagonist senses the transition into adulthood occurring—often through force or circumstance. For instance, when young Stephen Dedalus sits in a coffeehouse with his father and his father's friends, he feels prematurely aged. When his father's teacup rattles loudly because his hand is trembling—evidence of his heavy drinking the previous night—Stephen feels ashamed and tries to mask the sound by coughing. And as his father and his friends go on reminiscing about the past, Stephen realizes that he can no longer feel such pleasure: "[h]is childhood was dead or lost and with it his soul capable of simple joys" (102). In a similarly bleak moment, Plath's Esther, thinking back on her childhood, reflects that she was "only purely happy until [she] was nine years old" (75). More recently, in *Bastard out of Carolina,* when Bone's mother chooses her abusive partner over her daughter*,* twelve-year-old Bone reflects, "The child I had been was gone" (307). And in *Middlesex*, when Callie loses her virginity as a teenager, she immediately feels "dirtied and initiated . . . . all grown up," and she showers to try to wash away the experience and its attendant mantle of new adulthood (426). In these moments, adulthood is construed as negative, a loss, a forced

accommodation. Yet in the texts considered in this dissertation, moments of clarity and recognized maturation are often not a closing-in of options or a reckoning with reality, but rather an opening-out, a looking-ahead, a broadening of perspective. As the tentatively hopeful endings of *Salvage the Bones* and *Winter's Bone* suggest, this wider view of development expands the vistas of adulthood and the future for even the most deeply impoverished protagonists.

The open endings of these bildungsromane also expose what the authors in this study suggest as the new, contemporary goals of bildung. These novelists eschew the typical narrative endpoints of marriage, death, or an "adult" disillusionment with the world to instead emphasize development as an ongoing *process*. In "Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious," D. H. Lawrence asserts that "the goal of life is the coming to perfection of each single individual" (41). Yet for the female protagonists in the novels under study, the aims of bildung are far less lofty. Instead, across this group of texts, what emerges as the goal of coming of age for a young woman is not perfection, but rather empowerment, independence, and a sense of being at peace with herself. When Ifemelu feels that she had "finally spun herself into being," this realization comes not only in light of her personal and professional successes, but also in her recognition of her own shortcomings, such as her proclivity to be snobbish and to treat people callously. She accepts her fully spun self as a combination of virtues and flaws. Instead of striving for an ideal, cohesive self, the protagonists in these novels instead negotiate their multiple, multifaceted identities—their "plural formations" (Fraiman 12).

The constraints I imposed on this study—focusing on womanhood and concentrating on a small number of very recent texts—both facilitated the insights set forth above and expose their limitations. While I have intended my chosen novels to be representative of the characteristics of a much larger contemporary body of texts, the selection of different primary texts might have pointed me in different thematic directions. Indeed, there are certainly texts that will contradict or challenge the literary trends I have observed here, a fact that captures the exciting and challenging nature of bildungsroman scholarship. The genre's boundaries can vary widely based on how one defines the bildungsroman; it is also worth appreciating the wide range of texts that we consider part of our American coming-of-age canon, with protagonists ranging from a six-year-old in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a twenty-year-old facing a death sentence in *Native Son.* An obvious extension for this project would be to examine representations of male development in the contemporary American bildungsroman, either separately or alongside texts with female protagonists. What sites and pressures do authors emphasize as shaping development into manhood today? When authors write about young men protagonists, are they similarly drawn to the *weiterbildungsroman* to explore the developmental experiences of legal adulthood? Are recent texts with male subjects oriented toward different goals of bildung besides personal acceptance and independence? Such questions would further illuminate how authors are exploring the influence of gender on bildung, and more broadly, how our literature is representing the American coming-of-age process.

Finally, to conclude this project, I want to offer a reflection on why this genre continues to resonate so powerfully with readers, writers, and critics. Canonical authors like Marilynne Robinson, Louise Erdrich, and Toni Morrison continue to write coming-of-age novels today, powerfully disproving Buckley's claim that the genre typically attracts new authors still close to youth. Moreover, new versions of the genre also appeal to literary prize jurors. Critics also often invoke our classic bildungsromane in their praise of new texts: in reviews, *Prep*'s protagonist Lee Fiora was repeatedly compared to Holden Caulfield, and *Winter's Bone's* Ree was linked with Scout Finch. These stories are so enduringly popular that they have seeped into our cultural discourse.

And of course, readers, too, are strongly pulled to the coming-of-age story. Whenever I told people that I was writing a dissertation about coming-of-age novels, they immediately, regardless of age, wanted to hear what books I was writing about and tell me about the bildungsromane that had been formative for them. In explaining why *authors* may be so attracted to the genre, scholar Christy Rishoi hits on why I think *readers* are drawn to it as well. Rishoi points to the personally illuminating power of narrative distance: "the act of writing one's coming-of-age experience is also the act of ordering the conflicts and confusions—even chaos—related to the construction of identity in adolescence, a feat not easily accomplished *in medias res*" (8). The enduring generic patterns in these texts—e.g., a significant romantic relationship, heartbreak, or parental disappointment—can help us identify and understand events from our own lives, and perhaps more significantly, see such experiences in the context of our longer, overarching personal narratives. As George Eliot writes in *The Mill on the Floss*,

"Childhood has no forebodings; but then, it is soothed by no memories of outlived sorrow" (93). The bildungsroman can perhaps offer a wider lens for personal understanding by showing some sorrows and experiences as temporary.

These personal connections with literature can, in turn, give the genre a wide social power. James Baldwin described the connective power of reading:

> You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive or who have ever been alive. (Blow)

This kind of connection takes on a particular significance in today's deeply fractured society—a time when the 2016 presidential election engendered widespread racist, misogynistic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, when the Black Lives Matter movement fights for the simple recognition of "the validity of Black life," and when poor citizens and citizens of color still disproportionately face an "opportunity gap" that shapes their options for the future ("About Us"). As Joseph Slaughter explains in his work on the intersections between human rights legislation and the bildungsroman, "literary and cultural forms . . . do not simply reflect the social world. They in some ways also *constitute and regulate* it . . . they help shape how the social order and it subjects are *imagined, articulated, and effected*" (11, emphasis added). Literature, that is, matters, and diverse representation in literature matters. Jesmyn Ward points to literature's power to alter perspectives, especially regarding people of color, by taking a reader "into another world" that is perhaps far different from his own. She reflects, "How amazing is it that

literature has the power to subvert preconceived notions about black people, to change readers' perceptions of us, to induce empathy, to persuade them through feeling that black lives matter?" (Laymon). By offering increasingly nuanced, diverse depictions of what it means to grow up and become part of—or excluded from—US society, today's coming-of-age literature offers an indirect tool for the ongoing bildung (or *weiterbildung*) of its readers and communities.

I began this dissertation by looking to *Girls* as a sign of our interest in girlhood, womanhood, and the notion of extended or delayed maturation in the cultural zeitgeist. Though critics regularly lamented the characters' self-involved inability to simply "grow up," across six seasons, these characters do move—if sometimes reluctantly—toward adult responsibilities and identities. Their bildung routes, however, look very different from the traditional paths of the past. In the show's series finale, the lead character Hannah, faced with an unplanned pregnancy, chooses to become a single mother at twenty-eight and leaves New York City for the stability of a university teaching job; two other characters have already divorced. Beyond these deliberate interruptions of the marriage plot, the show also explores how its characters, just like the protagonists in the novels under study, negotiate their various "selves" in an effort to feel empowered and at peace with who they are and what they still desire to become. Like *Girls*, the novels featured in this dissertation also point to new directions, goals, and constraints for female coming of age today; and because the coming-of-age narrative is part of the water we swim in, the genre provides an incredibly rich site for registering the changing contours of identity formation. While these contours will continue to stretch and bend, this body of

literature helps us navigate what I suspect will be viewed in the future as a striking shift in the way we define adulthood and envision the paths and timelines for maturation into womanhood.

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